From Street Corners to Social Media: The Changing Location of Youth Citizenship in Guinea

Clovis Bergère

Abstract: This study explores social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter in particular, as emergent sites of youth citizenship in Guinea. These need to be understood within a longer history of youth citizenship, one that includes street corners and other informal mediations of youth politics. This counters dominant discourses both within the Guinean public sphere and in academic research that decry Guinean social media practices as lacking, or Guinean youth as frivolous or inconsequential in their online political engagements. Instead, young Guineans' emergent digital practices need to be approached as productive political engagements. This contributes to debates about African youths by examining the role of digital technologies in shaping young Africans' political horizons.

Résumé: Cet article explore les réseaux sociaux, Facebook et Twitter en particulier, en tant que lieux de vie citoyenne pour les jeunes Guinéens qui doivent être resituer dans une trajectoire historique qui comprend les coins de rue et d'autres lieux informels comme sites de médiation de la vie politique. Cela va à l'encontre des discours dominants qui décrient les pratiques numériques de la jeunesse guinéenne comme frivoles, inconséquentes ou déficientes. Plutôt, cet article propose 'd'aborder ces pratiques comme productives. Finalement, cet article contribue aux débats sur la jeunesse Africaine en rendant compte du rôle du numérique dans l'agencement des horizons politique des jeunesses Africaines.

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Resumo: Neste estudo, analisamos as plataformas das redes sociais, em especial o Facebook e o Twitter, enquanto lugares emergentes de exercício de cidadania por parte da juventude guineense. Estas plataformas têm de ser entendidas no âmbito de uma história mais longa do exercício de cidadania juvenil, contemplando as esquinas de rua e outras vias informais de mediação das políticas de juventude. Esta abordagem contradiz os discursos dominantes quer na esfera pública da Guiné, quer na investigação académica, segundo a qual não existe neste país uma prática de utilização das redes sociais e que acusa os jovens guineenses de serem frívolos ou inconsequentes no seu envolvimento político online. Pelo contrário, as práticas de utilização dos recursos digitais por parte da juventude guineense devem ser encaradas como formas produtivas de empenho político. Assim, através da análise do papel que as tecnologias digitais desempenham na formação dos horizontes políticos dos jovens africanos, pretendemos contribuir para os debates mais alargados acerca das juventudes africanas.

Keywords: social media; youth; literacy; generation; Guinea; digital practices

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On July 1, 2015, Guinean social networking sites (SNS) Twitter and Facebook lit up with comments.[1] At the center of the storm, which included over 1,500 comments, was the enactment of a new law, instigating a new tax on all telephone communications including fixed, cell phone, texting, and roaming charges. The "Taxe sur les Communications Téléphoniques" ("Telephone Communications Tax") required Guinea's four telecommunications operators to collect a tax on all communications, thus instantly raising the cost of all telephone-based communications by one Guinean Franc (GNF 1), or the equivalent of USD0.00013, per second.[2] The introduction of this new tax and new form of taxation is highly significant in Guinea, a country where collecting taxes has tended to be a rather chaotic process (Isbell 2017). However, what really caught the attention of young Guineans on Facebook or Twitter on that July morning was not so much the tax itself—although that was certainly a part of it—but a sentence in the official press release issued by the Minister of Mail Services, Telecommunications and New Information Technologies to announce the signing of the new law and tax. The sentence read:

> Le Ministre d'Etat en charge des Postes, Télécommunications et des Nouvelles Technologies sait compter sur la compréhension des populations qui ont toujours su faire preuve d'acte de suivisme (*sic*) pour l'intérêt supérieur de la nation Guinéenne. [The State Minister in charge of Posts, Telecommunications and New Information Technologies knows he can count on the understanding of local populations, who have always proved to act with followership (*sic*) for the higher interest of the Guinean nation.][3]

What really irked Guinean commentators on social networks was that the intended French word for "civism" or "good citizenship"—"*civisme*"—had

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been mistakenly replaced by its near homophone "*suivisme*" which translates as "followership," "blind conformity," or "herd spirit." The mistake, which had clearly escaped the scrutiny of the Minister—who signed the letter—and his communications office—which presumably wrote the press release in the first place—was immediately spotted by a young Guinean. Within minutes of the letter's release on the Ministry's website, the youth posted the letter on his Facebook profile, calling attention to the unfortunate or revelatory mistake, depending on how you choose to view it. He ended his Facebook post with a clear "we will not follow you like sheep." Instantly the message started circulating online. Fodé Kouyaté, the young head of the Association des Blogueurs de Guinée (ABLOGUI), or Guinean Bloggers' Association, relayed the message on both Twitter and Facebook, adding the hashtag #TaxeDeSuivisme to his post.[4] This instantly linked all commentary on the press release and thus, significantly, raised the young commentators' public presence and profile. Within the span of a few hours, the message was relayed over a thousand times and had become the subject of banter and pointed criticism on both Facebook and Twitter. Several Guinean news sites picked up the story, and by the next day the press release had been replaced on the Ministry's website by a corrected version.

This article explores social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter in particular, as emergent sites of youth citizenship in Guinea. More specifically it asks: what happens where an increasing number of interactions between youth and figures of authority, politicians and senior government officials in particular, take place and are mediated by digital platforms such as Twitter or Facebook? What are the consequences of this shift for youth as a political category in Guinea? Drawing on ethnographic and interview data with Guinean youth collected between July 2015 and July 2016, this study traces a shift in the location of youth citizenship, a term borrowed from Adeline Masquelier's (2013) work on tea circles in Niger. Through a detailed analysis of the claims made by young Guineans on social media of figures of authority and politicians, it argues that in order to make sense of the significance of social media as sites of youth citizenship, their emergence needs to be understood as deeply enmeshed in a larger history of youth citizenship. This history in Guinea, and West Africa more generally, is intimately linked to a spatial and temporal infrastructure of youth sociability, including sites of political engagement that exist outside of formal political processes, militant theater and street corners in particular. This broader context helps highlight the lines of continuation and points of rupture that arise as the governance of youth is increasingly mediated by digital technologies. The emergence of digital platforms such as Twitter or Facebook as key sites of youth citizenship is accompanied by a foregrounding of literacy as a key requirement for participation in public discussions. In this context, educated youths, who represent the majority of Internet users, find themselves repositioned in new ways as literate, a term that is vastly expanded to now include digital literacy and an ability to navigate the world. The cultural notion of *analphabète*—the French word for

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"illiterate"—finds itself reinvested with cultural meanings that both draw a boundary between youth as digital cosmopolitans and create the need to constantly transcend such boundaries in order to keep the channels open, a necessary aspect of getting by for impoverished and marginalized Guinean youth. Overall, this counters dominant discourses both in the Guinean public sphere and in academic research that decry Guinean social media practices as lacking, or Guinean youth as frivolous or inconsequential in their political engagements online. Instead, this article explores young Guineans' emergent digital practices, no matter how faint or seemingly trivial, as productive political engagements on the part of Guinea youths, efforts that need to be understood as part of a broader Guinean, and West African, history of youth citizenship. This contributes to debates about African youths by moving away from binary understandings of youth as either makers or breakers, agents of change or of chaos, in order to engage with the role of digital technologies in shaping young Guineans' political horizons.

The Digitalization of Political Life in Guinea

In Guinea, social networking sites such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter have emerged as key sites of youth sociability. At the end of 2015, Facebook—by far the most used social networking site in Guinea—was adding over 25,000 new users from Guinea per month, a trend that has since accelerated. Of these, over 50 percent were ages eighteen to twenty-four, and over 80 percent were ages sixteen to thirty-four, an age demographic that only represents about 35 percent of the overall population.[5] This rapid technological change is taking place within a social and economic context characterized by continued acute scarcity of goods despite plentiful natural resources (Campbell 1993), as reflected in Guinea's ranking 175th out 188 countries on the Human Development Index.[6] As elsewhere in Africa, women and youths have borne the brunt of the economic downturn and collapse of commodity prices which started in the 1990s. The loss of public sector employment under structural adjustment has affected educated youths most acutely, creating a now well-documented gap between their aspirations for office work and hope for social mobility within an ever-shrinking job market and blocked prospects.[7] In Guinea, young people's economic marginalization has been accompanied by an equally brutal process of political marginalization. Youths went from being at the heart of Guinea's national revolution under Sékou Touré's African socialist regime to being repeatedly described by politicians and figures of authority as "*déboussolés*" (disorientated, at a loss, lazy, corrupt, or dangerous). This devaluation of youth is not unique to Guinea. Mamadou Diouf (2003) has also described a similar process of the youth simultaneously being made to bear the burden of the nation's future while being systematically excluded from power and marginalized both by traditional authorities and by the failures of the postcolonial state. With excess time on their hands

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and a pressing sense that something needs to change, Guinean youths have turned to social media *en masse*. Naturally, political discussions occupy a central place. As one youth noted in his Facebook account: "politics is a national sport in Guinea, it's like the air we breathe."

Although the treatment of youth as a political category in Guinea follows a pattern familiar to most of its regional neighbors, former French colonies such as Senegal, Niger, or Ivory Coast in particular, it does offer a useful case for thinking about the digitalization of political life in Africa, and in the Global South more generally. Discussions of Internet technologies in Africa have tended to focus on a handful of countries seen as the leaders in new technology adoption, including South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, and Senegal, countries that are reaching a saturation point with regard to Internet penetration. As Deloitte (2014) noted, the so-called "next frontier" in Internet growth is located in countries such as Guinea, which has been long infamous for its lack of electricity even compared to its West African neighbors.

What is more, Guinea, despite notoriously patchy electricity and telecommunications infrastructures, was one of the first countries in the subregion to witness the power of social media for political debates, something that took a particularly extreme form under the brief but highly violent rule of Captain Dadis Camara and his infamous "Dadis Show," one of the subregion's first Internet phenomena. Between 1958, when Guinea recovered its independence following decades of colonial occupation, and 2010, when the first democratically-held presidential elections took place, the country only had two political regimes, both autocratic and dictatorial: the totalitarian socialist and nationalist regime of Touré between 1958 and 1984, followed by the military dictatorship of General Lansana Conté, which lasted from 1984 until his death in 2008. These two regimes were briefly followed by a disastrous and violent transition period marked by the media antics of Captain Moussa Dadis Camara, who seized power in a military coup in December 2008, shortly after Conté's death. The transition period was rendered especially memorable by the YouTube antics of Dadis Camara known as the "Dadis Show," a bizarre series of videos shown on Guinean television and YouTube in which the then head of the military junta in charge of the transition would use his famous "*franc parler*" (straight-talk style) to dress down officials, including his own ministers and aides, in a public sphere. In perhaps one of the most famous moments of the "Dadis Show," he addressed a rather surprised and somewhat dumbfounded German Ambassador, reminding him in all seriousness: "I am not your little kid. I am the president of Guinea. You have to respect my authority." Highly theatrical moments such as this one turned the "Dadis Show" into one of Guinea's first Internet phenomena, the show regularly breaking viewing records on YouTube, even at a time when the Internet was still a rarity in Guinea. The Dadis Show also marked a key historical moment when social networking sites began to emerge as prominent "spaces of engagement" between young Guineas and politicians.

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Another memorable, although much more somber, event associated with the Dadis Camara regime is the violent massacre on September 28, 2009. On that day, which marks the anniversary of Guinea's Independence, approximately 50,000 demonstrators gathered in the "Stade du 28 September," one of the largest stadiums in Conakry, to protest the military junta's handling of the transition and to demand the organization of democratic elections. Dadis Camara's response was swift: troops were sent in and opened fire on the crowd. At least 157 demonstrators were killed, over 1,253 were injured, and hundreds of women were raped. Hundreds of protesters were arrested and charged without trial. Dadis Camara was forced out of office shortly thereafter in December 2009, following a failed assassination attempt on December 3, 2009. On June 27, 2010, the country's first democratic elections were held. The violence of September 28, 2009, surprised most Guineans, despite high previous levels of political violence and the violent military repression of demonstrations having been part of the country's political landscape for years. For many of the youths who took part in the demonstrations on that day, it was a turning point in their political engagement, one that was now inevitably intertwined with the rapidly changing digital media landscape in Guinea.

In exploring the impact of social media on young Guineans' participation in political debate, this study focuses on the way that youths in Guinea use social media to generate political commentary and share it online within new digital "spaces of engagement" (Penney 2017:7), as well as on the reverse: how these new technologies come together with historical forces and political cultural forms that constitute youth in Guinea's changing socio-political terrain in new ways. This aligns with notions of *relational materiality* as proposed by Annemarie Mol and John Law (1995) and reworked for postcolonial contexts by Jenna Burell (2011). In making youth the focus of analysis, this research responds to an understanding of youth that is in line with the synthesis between youth as a position and youth as a process proposed by Henrik Vigh (2006).[8] This approach places generation at the center of analysis while keeping the analytical lens firmly on the changing political landscape in Guinea, a moving terrain that is increasingly mediated by new information technologies, social media in particular.

The history of youth as a social category in Guinea follows a pattern familiar to many West African contexts. As such, it is characterized by largely blocked horizons and possibilities, discredited and increasingly repressive traditional models, and social moratorium. As Daniel Mains (2013) summed up, for the overwhelmingly unemployed or underemployed African youth, such as the young Guineans who are the subjects of this research, "hope is cut."[9] Yet, while Vigh and Mains have shown youth to be a changing, contested, and often tenuous *social* category, a kind of waithood, to draw on Alcinda Honwana's terms (2012), my emphasis here is on youth as a contested *political* category. In Guinea, youth is constantly called upon in political discussions, by politicians, government officials,

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international organization actors, and everyday discussions on the street (McGovern 2012; Straker 2009). A radio public service announcement, for instance, called upon youth specifically to assume “their responsibilities” and participate in a formal government consultation. Similarly, only a couple paragraphs long, the official initial announcement for the 2015 election-monitoring campaign GuinéeVote made three references to “youth,” suggesting that youth as a constituent group in Guinea’s political landscape has a unique responsibility in the democratic process. As Joschka Phillips (2013) has shown, in Guinea, youths are not just a key feature of political speech, their bodies are also highly valued and called upon, in exchange for money, to attend rallies or support various politicians from both the Mouvance (the president’s Arc-En-Ciel coalition movement) and the opposition alike. At the heart of this article, then, is a concern with how their age demographic as a contested political category is circulated, called upon, and mobilized by Guinean youth as they increasingly inhabit (McFarlane 2011) social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter in particular.

Changing Sites of Youth Citizenship in Guinea

Arrangements of time and space are central to the operation of political power. In other words, the process by which young Guineans make claims on the government and in turn are governed does not take place in a vacuum. Rather, the possibilities and nature of these interactions are always mediated, located, opened up, and foreclosed by particular orderings of space and managements of time, including but not limited to transportation networks, technological advances, architecture, and the built environment (Larkin 2013; Von Schnitzler 2016; Malaquais 2002). Cultural infrastructures and spaces also rearrange the “apparatus of governmentality” in specific ways. In Guinea, “youth” has long circulated across various media to various political effects. Changing notions of youth played a key role in the establishment of Sékou Touré’s post-independence socialist-revolutionary regime; these notions offer a fascinating example of the shifting political mediation of youth in Guinea (Straker 2009). The re-envisioning of youth that was necessary for Touré’s socialist nation-building effort was mediated by, took expression in, and was ultimately contested through a variety of platforms such as political tracts, newspaper articles, revolutionary poems and novels, photography, and perhaps most importantly “militant” theater, which became compulsory practice for all young Guineans (McGovern 2012). These diverse modes of expression became forms of mediation through which new visions of youth in Guinea were imagined, enforced, and contested (Straker 2009:2; Diawara 1998). In other words, the “apparatus of governmentality” that formed around militant theater during Guinea’s socialist transformation became key sites of youth citizenship, spaces designed to regulate the bodies and minds of youth for the purpose of the revolution as envisioned by the scientific

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socialist ideals of Touré's nationalist rule. Yet, they also located young citizens and their political engagement within notoriously fluid and flexible orderings of time and space such as theater, art, music, and poetry. As Jay Straker has shown, this allowed youth to rework the terms of political engagement in order to carve out new opportunities for making claims on and sometimes outright contesting the authoritarian regime. In paying attention to the location of citizenship and its arrangements or mediation of practices of citizenship, we are able to see an expanded notion of citizenship emerge.

With the end of the socialist dictatorship following the death of Sékou Touré in 1984, militant theater disappeared as a prime site of youth citizenship. Under the authoritarian rule of General Lansana Conté between 1984 and 2008 and the concomitant slashing of the public sector under the diktat of structural adjustment, youths found themselves increasingly jobless, impoverished, and marginalized. During this period, which was characterized by rapid growth of the informal economy and eroding of both public sector and increasingly repressive traditional authorities, street corners emerged as key sites of youth socialization and youth citizenship. In the abandoned and marginal spaces of the rapidly decaying urban fabric, youths found spaces where, if only momentarily, the terms of political marginalization under the PUP's one-party rule and military stronghold could be circumvented and alternative futures imagined. As I have noted elsewhere:

> Faced with decaying urban institutions, Guinean youth in cities such as Conakry or Labé have constructed a complex network of self-organized social spaces, locally known as "bureaux," the French term for "office." These youth-created spaces have emerged as an alternative for urbanism, a Do-It-Yourself or "DIY urbanism," for young Guineans caught in a double-bind: increasingly irrelevant or repressive traditional models and failed postcolonial urban institutions. (Bergère 2016:133)

The point here is not to idealize or romanticize these often bare-bones and even dilapidated spaces but simply to take them seriously as sites of youth citizenship. Although absent from official discussions on youth provision or centers, these spaces nonetheless function as nodes that connect youth to politicians in important ways. When support is needed to attend a rally, organize an event, or simply "take the temperature" on the ground, politicians invariably go to these street corners and occupied spaces. Their positioning, social standing, and informal nature shape the dealings of young Guineans with political figures and authorities, not simply as a canvas for youth citizenship but as the very material of youth governmentality. Karen T. Hansen (2005), Jacinthe Mazzocchetti (2009), Julien Kieffer (2006), and Olawale Ismael (2009) have all noted similar processes in other West African contexts. Although these DIY sites of youth sociability came to prominence during the 1990s in Guinea, they have continued to occupy an

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important place in the world of young Guineans, and young Guinean men in particular, to this day.

However, in the past decade, the increasing centrality of digital media technologies in the daily lives of Guinean youth has been accompanied by the emergence of new sites of citizenship, namely digital spaces and places, Facebook and Twitter in particular. Despite a slow start and a seeming reluctance to "get online," the Guinean government is now increasingly using digital technologies and social networking sites for its external communication. This is partially the result of mounting pressure on the part of international organizations who see online communication as a key element of displaying "good governance" and enacting transparent government mandates (Roelofs 2017). As a result, the president, Dr. Alpha Condé, most of his cabinet ministers, and many official bodies now have social media accounts, typically on Twitter and Facebook. This provides opportunities for any Guinean citizen to follow them, comment, and sometimes interact through online discussions with these elected officials. I now explore in more details some of these interactions between Guinean youth and government officials in order to shed light on the significance of the emergence of digital platforms in the everyday politics of youth in Guinea.

Analphabête: Twitter Humor, Cultural Intimacy, and Gerontocratic Power

This article opened with an example of Guinean youth mobilizing social networking sites to expose an error made in French in an official document, in this case a press release issued by the Ministry of Mail Services, Telecommunications and New Information Technologies. Although significant enough to have warranted its own hashtag, #TaxeDeSuivisme, this example is far from unique. Rather, it forms part of a broader trend whereby young Guineans take to social media platforms to expose and correct errors in grammar, spelling, or vocabulary made in French in official and public documents. To give another example, an article on Guineenews.org, Guinea's largest online news outlet, published on November 1, 2015, mistakenly replaced the words "*en cavale*" meaning "on the run" with the words "*en canal*," which can either mean "in the canal" or "on the channel." This led to a series of word plays on both Twitter and Facebook. Some users wondered whether they were witnessing a "carnival"—"*carnaval*" in French—of errors, playing on the similarities between the word "*carnaval*" and "canal." Following a similar play on words, another young Guinean asked whether this would happen on "Canal +," the name of a major French cable TV channel available in most parts of West Africa, which positions itself as the leading francophone television network in the region. Again, the error was quickly corrected.

In fact, references to the inability of authority figures to correctly write in French is a constant source of banter and indignation on Guinean social media. The significance of the practice of using social media to expose errors made in French by authority figures in Guinea was further highlighted,

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after I had collected dozens of examples on social media, by twenty-five-year-old Guinean blogger Diakité. Diakité wrote a piece in December 2015 describing the practice in great detail, which begins by noting that Guinean bloggers have been exposing the "serious and intolerable" mistakes in official government documents, press releases, posters, and flyers for quite some time now. Diakité then highlighted two incidents, including an instance when a young Guinean blogger in her early twenties was barred from following the official Twitter account of the Guinean president, Alpha Condé, for having noted a spelling mistake in one of his tweets. This highlights the contentious nature of the practice and perhaps more particularly the role of gender and age, as the incident involves a young female blogger contesting a powerful older male figure. Clearly, the president viewed the correction of his error in this case as a sign of disrespect. The blog post then proceeds to analyze the video of Condé's speech at the Climate Conference—COP 21—in Paris in December 2015, listing all the linguistic and grammatical errors in the first five minutes of the president's presentation. Diakité's post in December 2015 constitutes the practice of correcting errors made in French by figures of political authority not simply as random or incidental but rather as significant enough to warrant designation as a "genre," recognizable by its differences from other classes of texts, to borrow Karin Barber's use of the term (2007:32). As Barber notes, genre is the "principle by which texts converse with each other," making them worthy of anthropological attention, given that they may be indicative of broader social processes "as a repertoire of skills, dispositions and expectation" (2007:36). In this specific case, this requires considering not only the ability to speak and write French correctly but also humor as a form of action or constitutive logics of the practice. One of the most followed and popular Guinean accounts on Twitter is a "fake" account purporting to be the president. The account uses the "fake" register common on Twitter, and people who follow the account are aware that it is not in any way affiliated with the president, something made clear in the account's short profile description as well as in the highly satiric and humoristic tone of the tweets. On this account, references to other people's ability to spell and write French correctly is a constant source of discussion. For instance, a notable tweet from the account exposes the ex-Minister Mme Domani Doré's poor grammatical record on Twitter, noting in a purportedly obfuscated tone:

> Walaï, bilaï, @domani_dore, tu as quand même été mon Ministre. Pas normal d'avoir des fautes dans chacun de tes 16 tweets. J'aime pas ça goo [Walaï, bilaï, @domani_dore, when you have even been my minister. Not normal to have mistakes in each of your 16 tweets. I don't like that boo]

In another tweet, the anonymous author of this "fake" account reacted to a typo made by a journalist and radio personality on Twitter, who wrote "nous réalités" instead of "nos réalités" as follows:

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> "A nous réalités"? J'avais dit et je confirme ici, la priorité de mon 3e mandat sera la formation @lamineguirassy [« To we (sic) realities? » I had said and I confirm here, the priority of my 3rd term on office will be education @lamineguirassy]

The satire here works on several levels. On one level, the tweet is mocking the error made in French by the journalist who wrote "we realities" instead or "our realities" in the original tweet quoted. But the "fake" Alpha Condé also refers to his third term in office, a highly controversial issue in Guinea. The current president, Condé, is in fact serving his second term, which technically is his last, given that the Guinean constitution only allows presidents to serve two consecutive terms. However, he has made public his desire to change the constitution before the end of his current term to allow serving Guinean presidents to run for a third time. The author of the "fake" account is therefore using this tweet not only to mock a journalist on his use of French but also to deride the President's efforts to stay in power beyond his second term (see Figure 1). The tone, sarcasm, and subversive impersonation at the heart of these examples of

Figure 1. A tweet from @Prof_AlphaConde, the "fake" Twitter account impersonating Guinean president Dr. Alpha Condé, denouncing his efforts to stay in power beyond his second term.

Alpha Condé
@Prof_AlphaConde

Follow

Mettez-vous à ma place, devant ça, vous rempilerez 3 et même 4, 5, 6 et 7 fois ou pas ? Kah ? 😎

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banter on social media are reminiscent of the playful nature of discussion on street corners. The commonly used term of "bureaux"—"office" in French—to sarcastically point to the lack of employment and excess time that young Guineans find themselves investing in these informal social spaces. "Bureaux" often adopt specific names, a practice Adeline Masquelier has described at length in Niger, noting how names such as RFI—Radio France International—spoke to young efforts to "insert themselves in a worldwide network of communicative practices from which they feel excluded," a form of "empowerment which expresses the fact of powerlessness" (2013:414). A particularly revealing Guinean example includes a "bureaux" named "guantanamo," in reference to the infamous American jail, a highly sarcastic expression of its members' jail-like, trapped conditions. Nicknames of "bureaux" members also often mimic figures of authority as a way to reclaim a place in the geopolitical order from which they find themselves on the margins, "Inspector," "Al Gore," or "Trump" being just a few examples. Authors such as Daniel Mains (2012:6) and Achille Mbembe (2001:104) have noted the centrality of joking and playfulness to the constitution of postcolonial subjects, and as such the practice of humorously decrying errors made in French in official documents online only continues that tradition. When I asked Diérétou Diallo, a twenty-three-year-old blogger from Conakry, about the significance of correcting errors in French, she explained:

> When you have an official body, I mean the President, whether it'd be the President, the Minister or whoever… as long as it's official, these are people who represent Guinea as a whole, these are people who… these are people who represent us outside, so when you, you see that these press releases are really sloppy, with huge mistakes, in the tweets or whatever, so and so says whatever, you tell yourself yes it would be good if you corrected it, and you re-post the tweet correcting the error at the bottom, even if you know that the guys will not do it, you know it will be read but… In fact, I think it's a way at least because it's public to show that not all Guineans are useless, that it is them that do this, I think it's a way to… At least I think that Guineans do this a lot because they would like that people on the outside who see these people communicate with loads of mistakes, that they also see Guineans who distance themselves from these mistakes, who know that this is not how you write it, that it doesn't work… That this is not the correct spelling, so I think it's really this willingness to show… that we know that this is not how it is written, that they… they are not cultured, they don't know how you write it, but we do.

Strong feelings about the importance of writing French correctly on social media were echoed in several other conversations I had with Guinean youth, including one, who despite admitting to struggling himself with French language, insisted that he would "unfriend"—i.e., bar—you from his Facebook account if you made too many typos and grammatical errors. As indicative of a repertoire of "skills, dispositions and expectations," these examples highlight the visibility of online communication to a perceived

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"outside" and the centrality of Guineans' relationship to this outside for online communication. Correcting errors made by officials on social media is thus a highly performative act. This echoes other practices aimed at demonstrating cosmopolitan cultural knowledge and projecting an "appearance of success," such as wearing brand clothing in Ivory Coast as documented by Sasha Newell (2012) or displaying specific cell phone handsets as discussed by Julie Soleil Archambault (2017) in the context of Mozambique. Yet, correcting errors in French on social media is also a specific mode of performance, one that connotes different cultural meanings or indexes different material investments than clothing or electronic equipment. It places literacy, now redefined to include digital literacy and an ability to read and act in the world—a cosmopolitanism—at the heart of processes of association, at the heart of the creation and maintenance of both boundaries and social bonds. Within the Guinean context, much of this digital "boundary work" on the part of cosmopolitan yet disenfranchised educated youth who form the bulk of the un- and underemployed class finds itself captured by what I term the "figure of the *analphabète*," the French word for "illiterate." This term has become both a designation and a point of reference in relation to which young Guineans navigate their social worlds. The term ceases to simply denote an ability to read or write but becomes imbued with meanings regarding modes of being or social subjectivities. Young Guinean M.O.U.D. (@moudjames)'s tweet provides here a good example of the disassociation between the literal meaning of illiteracy and what it connotes in online discussions among Guinean youth. Posted on October 11, 2015, it reads:

> Le grand problème en Guinée c'est que les intello (*sic*) sont plus analphabètes que les illettrés. [The big problem in Guinea is that intellectuals are more analphabetic than the illiterates.]

The terminology here is important. Although the French word "*analphabète*" is typically translated as "illiterate," the word "*illettré*," a direct translation of "illiterate" also exists in French—as do the words "analphabet" and "analphabetic" in English, although they are rarely used. Despite both "analphabète" and "illettré" being used to denote an incapacity to read or write, there are subtle differences between the two. Whereas "illettré" connotes someone who is not cultured, "analphabète" specifically implies that the person has not received any formal education. So being called an "analphabet" does not necessarily have anything to do with one's ability to read or write, as the rant about "Internet's illiterates" and M.O.U.D.'s tweet quoted above illustrate. To grasp the significance of intellectuals and authority figures, including people such as the president who hold advanced degrees from prestigious French universities, being designated analphabets, it is important to understand the role that Western education and French literacy came to play in changing articulations of social distinctions in the postcolonial period in Guinea. Mike McGovern's theorization of modernity, identity-making, and

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state-building efforts in the period immediately following independence in 1958 in Guinea is particularly instructive. Without going into too much detail about the unique blend of scientific socialism and Pan-Africanism that informed the often violently iconoclastic policies of the post-independence era under Sékou Touré, his work is important in historicizing the role of literacy and modern education within changing notions of identity and social distinction in Guinea. McGovern shows the historical links that exist in Guinea between literacy and political legitimacy, and how these have long been at the heart of the struggle around power between youth and their elders. For instance, he noted with regard to the Fulani Jihadist ideology that resulted in the seventeenth century holy war and establishment of the theocratic empire in the Futa Jallon area of Guinea:

> It was an ideology that was not modernist, as was Sékou Touré's Marxism, yet it shared a number of orientations, particularly that it validated education and literacy as sources of wisdom and the basis for legitimate leadership. This system emphasized acquired skills and knowledge over noble descent, and it signaled a shift in notions about personhood and power that presaged the modernist revolution to come in twentieth-century Guinea. It also tapped into structural tensions that existed in the region, such as those between elders and youth and between those of royal descent and the ambitious, competent slaves who sometimes usurped their positions. (2012:126)

When I asked my research participants what ideas they attached to the word "analphabet" when it was used to refer to authority figures such as the president who are clearly literate, they often describe this kind of analphabet as "toto," a fictional character at the heart of many jokes in Guinea.[10] Several Facebook groups are dedicated to "toto" jokes; as it was explained to me, "toto" is akin to the "village idiot," a reactionary male figure whom "girls like to ridicule." That the figure of the analphabet was associated with the "toto" when used in relation to authority figures was exemplified in a blog post that described ex-presidents Lansana Conté and Sékou Touré as analphabets, indicating in brackets next to that term that they meant "toto." Invariably, "toto" in this context connoted someone who is "unsophisticated," "uncultured," and "traditionalist." This was indicated in the extract from my conversation with the young female blogger quoted above, where she explained that in part, young Guineans' motivation for correcting errors made in French was to show that, unlike these figures of authority, they were cultured.

Although the intersections of youthhood, literacy, and a cosmopolitan disposition found in the digital practice of correcting errors made in French needs to be re-inscribed with the broader political history of Guinea as highlighted here, the specificity of digital circulation also needs to be accounted for. As a site of youth citizenship, social media platforms intervene in this cultural working of boundary on the part of youth in two major ways.

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First, the technology itself relies on users' ability to read and write, a major difference with, say, political discussion on street corners. As such, digital technologies become agents in the remaking of youth by foregrounding an existing fault line, deeply enmeshed with the colonial and postcolonial state. In the digital "spaces of engagement," the literary logics of the platforms encourage Guinean youth to further mobilize their literate abilities in order to challenge the terms of the gerontocratic order. Digital technologies also move communication from face-to-face to digitally mediated. This means that the "imagined" global audience of the "bureaux," who might call themselves "guantanamo" or in the case discussed by Masquelier in Niger "Club RFI" as a way to re-imagine their position in the world, is now actualized. On social media, Guinean youths find themselves actually responding to users from around the globe. As illustrated by Dieretou Diallo's assertion that "these are people who represent us outside," critique on social media, no matter how sarcastic or virulent, also entails a demand to defend one's image "outside," a process not dissimilar to "cultural intimacy" as proposed by Michael Herzfeld (2005). Just as the Cretan sheep-thieves in Herzfeld's argument about cultural intimacy create a symbiosis with the Cretan state that turns them into the best patriots in times of war, Guinean youth who decry the Guinean state as "backward" and "illiterate" and readily proclaim that they will not "follow like sheep" also invest by the same turn significant time and effort in upholding the Guinean state's image to the world. When they set up the hashtag #TaxeDeSuivisme they are vehemently attacking the Guinean government's policies while at the time asking it to correct a spelling mistake in an official document. When the fake account of the Guinean president generates a tweet that states "Mettez-vous à ma place, devant ça, vous rempilerez 3 et même 4, 5, 6 et 7 fois ou pas? Kah?" ["Put yourself in my position, faced with this, you would do it again 3 and even 4, 5, 6 or 7 times, wouldn't you?"]; and when that tweet is juxtaposed with a photograph of a hand-painted sign, a remnant of the 2015 election, that declares emphatically: "Let's vote for Dr. Alpha Condé 100%, he is the sun of the universe, God's chosen one, the hope of an accomplished people"; then it creates a satire that plays on several registers at once. It provides a pointed critique of president Condé's maneuvering to change the constitution to allow himself to stay in power for a third term, a change that has many Guineans on edge. But it also turns the mirror on Guinean citizens themselves as partly responsible for condoning Condé's desire to maintain his position of power.

"She is Transgenerational": Keeping Channels Open as a Condition of Youth

Thinking about cultural intimacy and boundary work on the part of youth in Guinea risks borrowing wholesale categories and theories arrived at in specific contexts, Crete for Herzfeld (2005) and France and the U.S. for Michele Lamont (1992). In fact, taking a closer look at the specificities of boundary

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work as it happens on social media in Guinea, the necessity to both reaffirm and simultaneously be constantly prepared to transcend boundaries was further highlighted to me in a series of posts that featured a dialogue among youths from Labé. The posts consisted of photographs taken by the youths of an older woman who is known to have mental health issues and is commonly seen roaming the streets of Labé wearing different and often extravagant makeshift outfits, for instance, a bright pink wig or very large sunglasses, almost always along with an old army uniform. What was particularly significant about these posts was not so much that the youths would post pictures of her as a way to highlight her idiosyncratic ways or draw a clear boundary between them as young, digitally literate males, and her as perhaps the epitome of an *analphabète*, but rather the extent to which the youth wanted to be seen with her.[11] Several posts included selfies taken by her side. And despite the humoristic tone of the posts, the jokes always remain full of genuine affection for Koumba, or Comba, as she is known. For example, one included a caption above the photograph that read "*Combatiquement vôtre*," a take on the expression "*Cordialement vôtre*" meaning "Sincerely yours" or "Yours truly." One of the selfies mentioned above included the note that read "*Avec mon Amiral Komba*" or "With my Admiral Komba," a reference to her army clothes, but also a clear expression of wanting to transcend the differences that may seem obvious at first, and perhaps a desire to claim a piece of what she represents. The army clothing is, in fact, significant here in linking the humoristic post to the Guinean state, both mimicked and subverted by Komba's use of military clothing. The posts therefore also can be read as a comment on the Guinean army and connection back to the Guinean state, a cultural intimacy in Herzfeld's sense. But it is unclear what exactly is to be gained immediately from this, perhaps "street creds" or simply projecting the image that one "circulates." Yet, the exercise has something to do with transcending social categories. When I asked one of my research participants about her, he explained that "She is very famous amongst all social classes, she is like a local mascot, and she is *trans-generational*."

Drawing any clear boundaries between those who are in the know and those who are not—in the sense proposed by theorists of community such as Lamont and others—is risky business in Guinea where youth, in particular, constantly need to "circulate," to "keep channels open."[12] Solid lines of demarcations or community policing run the risks of missing one's next opportunity. One rarely knows where it will come from. Katrien Pype makes a similar point in her work on mobile phones and politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo, when she notes that:

> There are new ways in which postcolonial subjects mobilize "not just a single identity for themselves but several, which are flexible enough for them to negotiate as and when required." (2016:645)

Of particular significance here is the fact that economic necessity in Guinea dictates that social categories such as class, age, or gender must be

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constantly transcended in order to make ends meet. Most of my research participants had several occupations at the same time. Most students had little schemes to make money on the side, helping out a relative at the market or providing small services such as repairing computers, picking up children from school, or going on errands. Nearly all worked at some point during the year in the family's fields in the country, helping during busy agricultural seasons such as harvest. Several took on unpaid internships with shipping companies or the local electricity supplier in the hope that they might be hired one day. Others had run side businesses in the entertainment or promotion fields. One ran a t-shirt printing business as a way of supplementing his main income in a call center for a major telecommunications company. As one of my research participants, currently working as an unpaid intern in Electricité De Guineé (EDG)—the national electricity company—and who had previously worked as a transport operative, moving goods and people around Guinea and Mali, as well as a stint in instructional support, explained:

> T: "I am currently working as a repairman for EDG."
> Me: "Woaw, you are so versatile"
> T: "You need to live. Here, specialization is not seen as a strong point. You need to dip into anything and everything."

"Dipping" requires that youth, and students in particular, "circulate" between classes, reinventing themselves as drivers, IT specialists, farmers, teachers, or political operatives, as well as "age classes," acting in turn as juniors doing an internship or traineeship or projecting the image of seniority necessary for working as a tutor, teacher, or running a business. On occasions, women took on roles traditionally seen as male—working as mechanics or driving taxis—and vice versa. Working with youth in Douala, Cameroon, AbdouMaliq Simone describes a similar process of "urban circulation." As he explains:

> As youth in Douala frequently remark, the ability to "become someone" is directly linked to the ability to "move around," and so circulation is also about acquiring a facility to operate everywhere, and to not be known as a specific son or daughter of a specific family coming from a specific place with specific ethnic origins and professions. (2005:520)

The ability to circulate, "steer the road" or simply keep one's options open and oneself ready to seize the next available opportunity is perhaps most crucial for the economically marginalized youth at the center of the study, who may have "middle-class" aspirations but who remain technically within the poor majority when defined through hard economic measures such as surviving on less than two dollars per day. Increasingly, this process is mediated by new information technologies. As Nick Couldry notes with regard to social media:

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> While it is literally impossible to be open to everything, the demand to 'be available' shapes an emerging practice, recognizably different from earlier modes of media consumption based on intermittent communication and a clear distinction between mass media and interpersonal media. Keeping all channels open means permanently orienting oneself to the world beyond one's private space and the media that are circulated within it. (2013:55)

Whereas, for Pype and Archambault, mobile phones afford young Africans with new ways to manage their multiple identities by controlling in new ways what they make available as public or decide to keep secret, social media platforms also seem to provide them with new opportunities to work on creating "boundaries" and maintaining social bonds. Just as what is made secret or public is kept in constant play, where, when, and against whom boundaries are erected or with whom bonds maintained needs to remain both porous and in flux. In other words, practices such as posting selfies with Komba, for instance, need to be understood simultaneously as a process of social distinction, a symbolic "boundary work" (Lamont 1992; Cohen 1985), and an action that might also signify a desire to maintain a social bond with people, symbolic forms, or identities—be it "*analphabètes*," older generations, or even those in uniform—against whom one is also constantly in the process of creating distinction. The uncertainty of the future and employment pathways is what requires this double-edged work: the necessity of working at boundaries and working at the heels of power relations while at the same time working at maintaining social bonds across and through these very same boundaries. Just as accounting for the impact of mobile phones on contemporary African politics requires us to grapple with the politics of secrecy as foundational to political power, accounting for the role of social media requires us to move away from what Jean-Godefroy Bidima calls the "paradigm of identity" (2002:8), in order to examine how identities in contemporary Africa are not only multiplied, but also mediated, translated, and to use Bidima's word, "traversed."

Conclusion: Re-assembling youth on Guinean social media

Social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook in particular, are opening up new possibilities for youth to insert themselves within the rapidly changing Guinea political landscape. Invited by the platforms' built-in slant toward entertainment and promotion, this digitally-mediated commentary often takes the form of humor, satire and parody in particular. Within the Guinean context, which is characterized by an increasingly repressive attitude toward those critical of the government, this allows youth to mobilize social media in order to open spaces for debates and to resist practices that attempt the foreclosure of public sphere and discussions. Such a tactic, using humor and satire to make those in power available for banter, is complex and runs the risk of trivializing the message. The Guinean government has been particularly effective at maintaining its image oversees as a guarantor of democracy in this potentially

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volatile region. Some of its international legitimacy may indeed come from its perceived tolerance of humorous practices online. Still, for young Guineans, whose horizons are daily foreclosed, margins of operations are notoriously limited, and satiric commentary on social media might in fact be one of the few remaining possibilities for shaping public conversations on topics such as Condé's maneuvers to cling to power beyond the maximum mandated two terms or laying claim to their right to official documentation.

Although rarely claimed as a community or a social position from which to make claims, youth as a political category often runs as a sub-text to debates about social media practices in Guinea. As a result, within the changing mediation of political debates in Guinea, youth as a political category is also being remade, re-mediated rather than remediated. The double meaning of "remediation" might in fact hold the key to conceptualizing the changing relations of youth in digital times. Rather than providing any solution, cure, or remedy to the crises of youth, social media invite practices that also often come at a cost for youth, who find themselves increasingly controlled and regulated by the very same technologies they use to claim a voice and a stake in public debates. What is more, by foregrounding literacy as central to digital practices and abilities, social media platforms invite youth by design to reinforce processes of social distinction and boundary-making articulated around who is literate and who is not. In a context where keeping one's options open is the focus of much daily work, this for youth comes at a price. Rather than pre-determined lines of progress, the remediation of youth necessitated by the massive adoption of social media in Guinea is formed in the new connections and moments of encounter that take place on social media platforms. New ways of "presencing" youth, of cohering around a hashtag and orienting the direction of political debates, shape the ways in which youth as a political category is assembled, re-assembled, and re-made, digitally re-mediated. Paying attention to the broader historical context of youth citizenship in Guinea draws attention to political engagements that typically fall outside of assessments of young people's interest in politics that only account for formal political processes such as voting and party affiliations. It helps take into account everyday engagements, including tracing continuity and change as political discussions, increasingly move to the digital sphere. This move has been accompanied by a foregrounding of literacy as a cultural fault line, one that also must be traversed and transgressed. The digitalization of political life in Guinea also forces a re-thinking of the very categories by which we tend to account for youth, including moving away from notions of generation that rely on rigid definitions of boundaries.

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Notes

1. Clearly Facebook and Twitter are not Guinean platforms or companies. In specifying Guinean Facebook or Twitter, I follow Daniel Miller's use of Trinidadian Facebook to designate the specific iteration of social media platforms as they are realized in Guinea and emphasize the conceptual need to approach them as contingent and localized rather than global (see Miller 2011).
2. As of August 2016, these companies are: Orange-Guinee, Mtn-Guinee, Cellcom, and Intercell. In Guinea, a loaf of bread costs GNF1,500, rice costs GNF4,000 a kilo, and vegetables such as onions cost GNF250 apiece. Therefore, although the tax was dismissed as insignificant by the Minister, a four-minute phone call would cost you nearly GNF240, or almost enough to buy one onion under this new tax. An hour on the phone would require the tax equivalent of nearly one kilogram of rice, a significant amount, given that Guinea is ranked 179th out of 188 countries according the 2013 Human Development Index.
3. All translations from French to English are my own.
4. #TaxeDeSuivisme (in French) translates as #FollowershipTax or #HerdSpiritTax in English.
5. See www.socialbakers.org
6. http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/GIN
7. See Honwana (2012); Durham (2004); Mains (2013); Diouf (2003); and Jeffrey (2008, 2010), for example.
8. See also Cole (2010) and Durham (2004).
9. Out of the twenty young Guineans aged eighteen to twenty-nine who took part in this research, only two had a steady job. All others were either unemployed or got by through temporary jobs, and as with the Ethiopian youths in Mains' research, by making themselves available to whatever opportunities arose, whether that included selling t-shirts, doing odds jobs for a rich patron, running homework help for youth, or transporting goods between Guinea and neighboring countries.
10. "Toto" jokes have their origins in French folklore, where the phrase "zero plus zero" references a well-known childhood rhyme (Opie & Opie 1959). It was, however, adapted and remade into a whole joking genre in Guinea.
11. Although the young women who participated in my research from Labé knew of her, I did not witness any picture of her posted online.
12. AbdouMaliq Simone's work on African cities (2004) is informative in this regard.

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