

Article

Mobile Film Festival Africa and Postcolonial Activism

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Abstract: This paper enters into a debate of how new and potentially more accessible technologies might affect freedom of expression for heretofore disenfranchised peoples and postcolonial social and political development. This essay examines short films produced on camera phones by amateur African filmmakers for one of the many existent mobile phone film festivals: Mobile Film Festival Africa held in 2021. Mobile Film Festival, an annual and international festival of short-length movies, was founded in 2005 based on the principle “1 Mobile, 1 Minute, 1 Film”. Because of the highly destructive mining in Africa required to obtain the minerals necessary for mobile phone production, because of the Western narratives of progress mobile phone sales build upon, and because of the fact that mobile phones are instruments of capitalism that largely feed big Western countries, mobile phones are themselves tools of neocolonialism and digital colonialism. Thus, a film festival that markets itself as a means of social progress but that relies upon mobile phones in Africa provides an interesting and quite complicated case study. Two of the award-winning films from this festival recognize in different ways the complicated relationship between mobile phones and postcolonial activism.

Keywords: settler colonialism; social media; YouTube; mobile film festivals; new media; Africa; mobile phone; camera phone; resistance; social activism; postcolonialism

1. Introduction: Social Media and Activism

The spring of 2011 brought to screens worldwide images of peaceful protests and street demonstrations known then and now as “the Arab Spring”. The story presented by many media outlets in the United States was that a relatively new techno-collective force known as “social media” had facilitated communication and collaboration among idealistic youths, anti-corruption unions, and others to create a wave of activism beginning in Tunisia and spreading to neighboring countries (Howard and Parks 2012).¹ Social media and new media in general were credited far and wide with providing a microphone for the “voice of the people” and lauded for their democratizing tendencies.² Social media, it seemed, was a game changer for social justice activists.

However, only a few years later, the conversation about social media had shifted. The US elections of 2016 and 2020 again made social media’s effects a topic of conversation; but this time, instead of being hailed as a tool for democracy, social media was blamed as a weapon of intentional confusion and disunity and labeled a tool of authoritarian and neocolonial regimes. Even more frightening to social justice activists were claims of new and social media as providing new venues of surveillance and disruption (Liedtke 2016; Oh and Vongkiatjajorn 2016; Eichenwald 2016). What is the true face of social media when it comes to activism, where by “activism”, I mean thought and behavior that resists an oppressive ideological trend? Is social media a tool of connectivity, self-expression, and the voice of the voiceless? Or is it a tool of capitalism and oppression? As media critics like Gino Canella are currently noting, the primary tools for contemporary activists supporting a range of causes across the globe (Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, etc.) involve social media. But for people living in postcolonial spaces, does social media do more harm than good?



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This paper enters into ongoing debates about how new and potentially more accessible technologies might affect freedom of expression for heretofore disenfranchised peoples across the globe and their postcolonial social and political development. How might new technologies and distribution methods open up “spaces” for emerging voices challenging neocolonialism and settler colonialism to be captured and heard?³ This essay will address this question by taking a close look at short films produced on camera phones by amateur African filmmakers for one of the many existent mobile phone film festivals: ([Mobile Film Festival Africa, Mobile Film Festival 2021](#)). Mobile Film Festival, an annual and international festival of short-length movies, was founded in 2005 based on the principle “1 Mobile, 1 Minute, 1 Film”. A comparison of websites for iterations of Mobile Film Festival shows that in some years, the festival asked for films from anywhere in the world but oriented around a theme. The 2020 edition, for instance, had the theme of “Women’s Empowerment”, while the 2021 contest was themed “Make Peace with Nature”. However, the 2021 festival also included a call for films, and filmmakers focused on and oriented in Africa, with the title of the geographically-focused festival being “Mobile Film Africa”.⁴ The African contest had no proscribed topic, but many of the submissions, not surprisingly considering the festival’s timing, discussed the effects of the then-ongoing COVID pandemic along with other topics—some light, some serious.

Also not surprising considering the geographical locus of that festival was that many other submissions addressed issues of postcolonialism/neocolonialism and technology. Africa is an interesting postcolonial space not only because roughly 90% of the continent was colonized by Europe at one time or another with many spaces still settled but also because of its complicated relationship to mobile phone technology. On the one hand, mobile phone technology has opened up some African spaces to a new kind of connectivity ([Sambira 2013](#))⁵. Especially for poorer communities where 19th and 20th century governments for a range of reasons did not invest in analog infrastructure, the wireless digital technology of mobile phones has provided a means of phone and Internet connection not yet achieved. Across Africa, mobile phones are relatively affordable and do not require a contract, with “data” being available for purchase in grocery and drug stores and not requiring the expensive laying down of wires. Thus, mobile phones can provide a means not only to call and text but also to access the Internet and, significant for this study, a means to record and immediately and widely communicate self-expression through text, sound, and video. Mobile phones could, then, provide a means for creativity and organized activism.⁶

On the other hand, however, because of the highly destructive mining in Africa required to obtain the minerals necessary for mobile phone production, because of the Western narratives of progress mobile phone sales build upon, and because of the fact that mobile phones are instruments of capitalism that largely feed big Western countries, mobile phones are themselves tools of neocolonialism ([Niarchos 2021](#); [Azmi 2021](#)). Thus, a film festival that markets itself as a means of social progress but that relies upon mobile phones in Africa is already an interesting and quite complicated case study. Before analyzing two of the award-winning films of the festival, which themselves critique mobile phone technology as a tool of activism, this essay will next demonstrate that the laudable aims of the film festival of creating a level playing field are troubled by the realities of accessibility.

2. Mobile Film Festival Africa and YouTube: A Study in Contradictions

The annual festival called simply Mobile Film Festival aims to encourage emerging filmmakers worldwide by using new media and accessible technologies to promote self-expression on major issues of global interest, many related to historical and current colonialism. As Bruno Smadja, founder of Mobile Film Festival explains on the festival’s website, “These films were created by young Africans who have this continent in common and who want to tell and share it in images. . . These films tell the story of Africa today in a creative, inventive, intimate way with humour and engagement on important societal issues”.⁷

The festival aims to level the playing field for aspiring filmmakers who have a story to tell but not the expertise or financial backing to tell it.⁸ The Mobile Film Festival website says that its aim is “to discover, reveal and support the film talents of tomorrow through impact films on major themes, such as climate change, human rights or women’s empowerment, at a minimum cost for the participants (free participation!)”. According to Mobile Film Festival’s Communication Manager, when given this opportunity “in its six previous editions, the festival received 6414 films from 157 countries, achieved an audience of over 134 million views, and supported young creators with a total of USD 390.000 in production grants” (Rodríguez 2022). According to the Mobile Film Festival Africa website, the 2020–21 Pan-African edition received 497 submissions from across the continent. Considering an average of 1000 submissions from the entire globe for each of the six prior festivals, half that number for the solely African edition seems a respectable submission rate, a number no doubt achieved because of the intentionally few restrictions for submission, including cost and required technology. However, we should remember that even though mobile phones are low cost in Africa, they are not cost free, nor is the technology needed to edit together the footage to the one-minute length or overlay the required subtitles and background music. And the knowledge of how to create a quality film and oversee editing, subtitling, and sound would also likely be more widely available to middle-class, urban, male, educated African citizens (perhaps university students) than to the general populace.⁹ The mobile phone does in many ways lower the bar for submission, but it does not remove the bar completely.

Festival managers also worked to make the films accessible to a wider range of audiences than typical studio-released films. As Smadja explains on the Mobile Film Festival Africa website, “All the films are accessible free of charge via all major social networks and YouTube. All of them are subtitled in French, English and Arabic to make them even more accessible”. Taking Smadja’s claim about language accessibility first, Smadja is correct that subtitling with the three global languages does allow greater accessibility, since many Africans of the continent’s 54 nations speak one of these languages in addition to one indigenous language. For practicality, French, English, and Arabic also allow the consumption of the films outside of Africa, but we must remember that this “accessibility” is an after-effect of global colonization and a symptom of continued neocolonization.

Second, as Smadja explains, an important part of this planned accessibility includes the use of the digital media platform, YouTube¹⁰, through which the films are distributed. YouTube, like mobile phones themselves, is not as unproblematic economically or politically as the contest’s organizers would have one believe. Founded in 2005 and now owned by Google, YouTube is a multinational corporation and platform that allows users to upload, view, rate, share, add to playlists, report, and comment on videos and to subscribe to other users or “channels”. A spring 2022 analysis reports that over 2 billion logged-in users visit YouTube each month, and every day, people watch over a billion hours of video and generate billions of views (Chen 2022). UGC (user-generated content) comprises much of the content available on YouTube, with some users becoming well-known “YouTubers” and using YouTube creation as their livelihood (McFadden 2022). Because of its large viewership, YouTube makes sense as a venue for Mobile Film Festival Africa, which also desires a wide viewership for its own fundraising (the website lists corporate sponsors) and for the exposure of the aspiring filmmakers. As Smadja directs his readers, “Now it’s up to you! They [the filmmakers] are counting on you, film enthusiasts, creators, film schools, associations, film commissions..., to discover them and then to bring them to life for as many people as possible via your social networks, websites, but also through TV or cinema screenings”.¹¹ One hopes that the YouTube venue helps to ease this distribution and that other viewers stumble across the amateur African short films when looking for something similar or even something else.

Smadja is correct that YouTube offers a low-bar platform in that it requires no user fees and only an email address for users worldwide to create, post, and consume content. Thus, it is “free” as long as one does not mind consuming advertising and being subject to data

mining. One should also note that the cost of the data used to upload or download a video to/from YouTube might, realistically, place this platform out of the reach of the lowest economic sectors. The short length of the films would help make them more accessible to a larger swath of Africans, since the data necessary to download a one-minute YouTube film would be far less than that needed for a longer film. But all data costs someone money, whether folded into school or university tuition or bought at a grocery store.

Also problematic about YouTube is how it curates content. Supported primarily by the advertisements users must watch periodically in videos, YouTube, like all social media platforms, uses an algorithm to move sponsored content to the forefront for all viewers and to create tailored viewing lists based on users' viewing histories, channel subscriptions, and "likes". In that it shapes viewer experiences and is a for-profit business, the platform does not provide an unproblematic social activist "space", though it does create a mechanism through which users globally, who might not be able to create or sponsor their own webpage, can post on a range of topics. One might imagine it as the metaphorical bathroom wall but one where writing by paid or paying graffiti artists is moved to optimal viewing positions. Or perhaps a better metaphor for this study is that YouTube provides a town square where protesters can gather but also where hawkers can sell wares and buskers can entertain for donations. Because the owners of the town square receive a cut of the sales, they use an algorithm to give paying or paid gatherers the prime real estate. YouTube does serve the greater good by hosting these "free" festivals, but we should remember that the festivals bring users to YouTube who might not have encountered the site before, spreading its neocolonial influence further into postcolonial space.

Despite these problems, YouTube is the chosen venue for Mobile Film Festival and others of its ilk, with YouTube, of course, gaining from the revenue of the views of the festival's films, not the filmmakers. But again, despite these many issues, mobile phones and YouTube do greatly simplify the process of making a film, and they do open access to many, if not all, amateur filmmakers. Whereas traditional film has real-world parameters, with budgets (anywhere from millions to thousands of dollars, since even microbudget films by new filmmakers have investors and cost thousands of dollars), a crew (usually at least two people—one holding the camera and one in front of it—but up to thousands for bigger budget films), technology (cameras, film stock, sets, costumes, etc.), and more, a film made on a camera phone could potentially have only one participant and little technology. But what do these aspiring filmmakers choose to do with their one minute in the metaphorical spotlight? When handed the microphone, what do they choose to say? For a partial answer, the next section of this essay will focus on Mobile Film Festival Africa's top films.

3. The Award-Winning Films

Mobile Film Festival Africa in 2021 had 497 submissions from across Africa, from which 50 finalists were chosen by a jury composed of African-born celebrities (a musician, an actress, and three filmmakers) to be featured on their website and shown through YouTube. The fifty finalist films exhibit a range of levels of filmmaking talent and address a range of topics: some showcase a high level of filmmaking skill and sophistication in technique; others look as if the camera were positioned in a stationary spot and then the actors acted, spoke, or danced in front of it. Some of the top fifty films were comical and even entertaining, while others were more serious. A handful of the fifty finalist films were artfully composed but had a difficult plot or message to discern. In all, the top fifty films show an enthusiasm for the project and a desire to communicate, which can be felt through the screen, despite their varying success.

Out of the top fifty films in 2021, seven were chosen for special awards: Best French Speaking Film, Best Original Music Score, Best African Female Director, Best Documentary, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor, and the Grand Prize.¹² The seven award-winning films were all serious in tone with a clear social message related to issues of poverty, lack of opportunity, migrancy, and xenophobia—issues that are common in (though not

relegated to) postcolonial or neocolonial states. Also produced by amateur filmmakers using the required camera phone, each of the seven award-winning films (except the one documentary) included an actor or actors and a set, which was in some cases quite complicated and in others quite simple, but each was successful at conveying a message and making the most of the medium.

Because of the allowed length of a single minute, each award-winning film conveys an amazing amount of material in a short amount of time, so each message is stark, with the overall meaning often only discernable in the film's final seconds.¹³ The French-speaking Award winner, "It is All I Have", for example, features a male voiceover saying "Every day I do what I don't want to do. It's hurts so much that I feel sorry for my body. If only I were a boy, because in this furnace at least they manage to get through it without being hurt". These words are spoken over images of a derelict-looking hallway and then a man moving into the screen buttoning up his pants. The male voice says "That's why I tell myself every day that I am a man". The viewer might suppose that this is the man's story of prostituting himself until the camera moves around the corner and shows a young girl lying on a towel on the floor. The male voice continues telling the girl's story, that as a homeless orphan, she has to prostitute herself for food. Only in these final seconds does the male voiceover match the girl's moving lips, showing that the male voice is her telling herself she is a man and that the film's message is of despair, intractable poverty, and the commodification of the female body. In one very short minute, one receives not only a complicated and sad age-old story but also the use of an innovative approach to force viewers to inhabit two gendered perspectives.

Other films are less surprising in their conclusion but are just as focused on serious issues. The winner of both the Original Music Score and African Female Director awards, "Face Mask on Sale", shows a young pregnant woman eventually worn down by the isolation enforced by COVID. At first, she enjoys the freedom of leisure, but her depression grows as the film's minute progresses and the COVID-enforced isolation endures. Similarly, the Documentary Film Award winner, "Cemetery of Strangers", relates the story of a Tunisian fisherman who buries migrants who have died at sea and washed up on shore, giving them a dignified if anonymous burial, stressing the sad realities of migrants who would risk death for a better life.¹⁴

Each of the final seven films is worthy of greater analysis, but two of these award-winning films, "The Water of Life" and "I Am Freedom", directly engage with the questions of this essay about the complications of new media for self-expression, connection, and even activism in the postcolonial state. Both films address the material realities of postcolonial Africa, including technology or the lack thereof, and both press back against some of the stated aims of the festival, questioning if communication technologies are empowering or just the opposite. By being gathered in the award-winning seven finalists, the films, as this essay's next section will show, unintentionally speak to each other, both in their discussion of technology and in their examination of neocolonialism.

4. "The Water of Life"

The first film under close examination clearly addresses colonialism and neocolonialism and, less obviously, technology. "The Water of Life", winner of the Director's Award, begins by showing a stark landscape of a field of dry grass with two figures in the distance as choral music (with lyrics in Latin) begins to swell. The camera then cuts to the same figures, now in the foreground and recognizable as two dark-skinned men, one with darker brown skin than the other, barefoot and dressed in stained and torn loose beige clothing that blends in with the arid landscape and brown dry grass. Both men attempt to drink from a bottle they pick up from the ground, which the viewer sees is empty when each man turns the bottle upside down above his thirsty mouth, with no drops of liquid coming out. The despairing men toss the bottle away as a metal box appears in the foreground. The men run towards the camera and the box, kneel down to open it, and pull out another bottle, which they struggle to open but cannot.

For the first thirty seconds of the film, the exterior semi-arid landscape, the men's non-descript clothing, and the generic props do not mark the film's setting as any particular time or place. The setting becomes more clearly modern, however, when the legs of another man suddenly enter the screen from the right. The camera changes to a side view to show the entire figure of the new man, who we now see is white complected, dressed in a dark suit with a modern cut, and holding two white cloth bags as he stands facing the two brown men who are still kneeling on the ground. The camera pulls in to show one of the men, the one with the darker skin, reaching for a rock. A split screen shows his serious eyes as his hand grasps the rock. The same split shot is repeated as the lighter-skinned man also grasps a rock, with his eyes also in closeup at the top of the screen. The viewer wonders if the men are going to defend themselves against the white man or fight for possession of the box.

In response, the standing white man pulls out a gun, which he points at the two kneeling men, with another quick split screen shot. The man motions with the gun, and the brown-skinned men stand and move away from the box. We see the white man pull from the box the bottle the men were earlier trying to open, which he places into one of the cloth bags he carries, which the viewer now sees has "wealth" (in English) imprinted on it. He takes from his other white bag, which the viewer now sees is labeled "freedom", another bottle, which he tosses to the two brown-skinned men, who drink from it thirstily. In the next shot, we see that the freedom bottle is empty and lying on its side in the dry grass. We then see that the two brown-skinned men are again kneeling in the grass, but now with their mouths covered in black duct tape. As the white man walks away with the box and his bags, the viewer sees that the discarded empty bottle from which the other men first tried to drink is labeled "education".

As this description hopefully conveys, these short films convey an amazing amount of information in a short time, telling a larger story partially by reverting to symbolism. The brown and black man, one supposes, represent the formerly colonized people of southern and northern Africa, and the suit-wearing white man the neocolonizer, meaning that the story would be of the continued exploitation of the African people and their resources. The description of "Water of Life" submitted by the filmmaker (available with the film) says, "This film tells the miserable existence of African people whether in North Africa or sub-Saharan Africa despite their wealth. Since neocolonialism is appropriate with the force in counterpart of a pseudo freedom, this idea is described from the water symbol of life and the thirst of these peoples for freedom, wealth, well-being and education". When this amateur filmmaker had the opportunity to choose a topic for his one minute of self-expression, he chose, as his description makes clear, to tell a story of neocolonialism and oppression.¹⁵ One supposes that his point would be to call attention to this situation with the aim of resisting and interrupting it, which is an activist aim.

A closer examination of the film's elements, however, raises questions about the film's consistency in its stated intent. The white man takes "wealth" at gunpoint (the superior technology of the gun wins out against the brown men's rocks) but tosses the men "freedom" (which the film's description calls "pseudo freedom") to drink, which the men do. When they exhaust what is in the bottle labeled "freedom", they are left gagged with only the already-empty bottle of "education". Is this point meant to show that African people have exhausted or squandered "education" and are now exhausting "freedom"? Or that the "pseudo freedom" (the water of life) was not actually freedom since it was given by the neocolonizer in exchange for wealth? Once they have consumed "freedom", presumably the white man/neocolonizer places the tape over the brown men's mouths, meaning that they now lack the ability to communicate with their voices or hands and the agency to resist, just as they lack education and wealth.

The film as a text and as a medium, one might argue, is itself a tool of self-expression and resistance but not one that the film proffers in its message. The white man's suit and style of gun place the film in the latter 20th or 21st centuries, yet the technology featured in the film (the gun, the box, the bottles, and the bags) is of the 19th century. Technology is

elided as a means of resistance. The brown men do not have access to anything beyond rocks—no guns, knives, books, farming implements, shelters, and certainly not a mobile phone to call for help, send a message, or create a film. Technology in this film is something used against brown Africans, not something used by them.

Even though the technology Dakhlaoui chooses to use to make his film is recent and digital, the technologies *in* his film are not (bottles, bags, rocks, a gun, and a box). He tells a new story (the continued practice of neocolonialism) through an old allegory, since the phrase “water of life” in the Biblical sense means the spirituality through which the holy spirit will cleanse and fortify the soul of the believer. The water of life in the film, however, one assumes would be contained in the bottles labeled “freedom” and “education”, which are both empty and which the men, with their taped-over mouths, cannot drink anyway. Or perhaps the duct tape over the men’s mouths indicates a failure of communication technologies, such as the mobile phones on which the film was shot or the film itself. In this way, the film itself is wrestling with the tension of new media and digital technologies versus the African space in a more complicated way than described or perhaps even realized by the filmmaker. In the end, however, despite its muddled symbolism, “Water of Life” is clear in its attempts to resist neocolonialism and inspire others to see Africa as a space unfairly exploited, which is an activist aim.

5. “I Am Freedom”

The second film under close examination more directly addresses technology and its effects and less obviously neocolonialism and postcolonialism. A companion award winner to “Water of Life” is “Je Suis Liberte” (“I Am Freedom”), winner of the Grand Prize Africa and EUR 10,000. As with “Water of Life”, “I am Freedom” includes a short description, presumably submitted with the film and written by the filmmaker. This description reads: “A woman in the name of Liberty dies on a bed, around her, teenagers hypnotized by the screen of their smartphone”. This amateur filmmaker (Marcel Moussa Diouf, who lists himself on LinkedIn as a student in Dakar) also takes as his subject a serious topic related to the current culture of neocolonial Africa and technological development, though in this case, the film itself is directly critical of the technology with which the film is made.

The first 30 s of the film has the camera jumping from part shot to part shot, in a seemingly disconnected manner, but against the diegetic rhythmic beeping of what sounds to be a hospital machine. “I Am Freedom” begins with the sound of numbers being entered into an electronic keyboard like a telephone, which leads to a closeup of a brown-skinned woman’s serious face, with her nose and eyes topped with what looks to be a hospital cap. The camera then cuts to a pair of brown-skinned hands typing a text in French on a mobile phone as the sound of tapping is added to the rhythmic beeping soundtrack. The camera then cuts to a hose covered in gauze on one side, with what looks to be blood flowing through it. The camera then cuts to another pair of brown hands texting in French on another mobile phone. It is clear that this phone is different from the first phone because this one is cracked, and these hands have a bracelet instead of a watch on the left wrist. We then see a female head covered in a white mask with black text on it that reads “Selfite” (“Selfie”) and then a male head covered in a similar mask, this one reading “Shombie” (zombie) ([Urban Dictionary 2023b](#)).¹⁶ A third brown face is then shown covered in a white mask reading “Athazagaphobe” (someone afraid of being forgotten or ignored) before a third pair of hands is shown also typing in French on a mobile phone ([Ghoshal 2020](#)). The next shot shows the whole of the hospital-capped woman’s face before another cut again shows a tube with blood running through it.

The second half of the film pulls together these disparate visual and aural elements. We see an overhead shot panning across the heads of three people typing on their mobile phones. Another closeup of brown hands shows someone scrolling through a feed before showing the mask (presumably on the figure’s face) reading “Nomophobe” (a portmanteau of “no mobile phobia”), a new term for a condition when people have a fear of being detached from mobile phone connectivity ([Bhattacharya et al. 2019](#)). A final shot shows a

mask labeled with “phubber” (“phone” plus “snubber”), a slang term for someone who ignores a companion in order to give attention to their mobile phone instead, and then another shot of a tube with blood flowing through it (Urban Dictionary 2023a). The next shot shows that the blood tube is flowing into the top of one of the mobile phones and then another. The next shot shows multiple tubes of blood flowing into multiple mobile phones as people type on them. A final shot begins with a closeup of the words “Je Suis Liberte” written on a piece of paper, which lies across the torso of the woman on the bed, while the sound changes from one of a steady beeping to the sound of a flatline. The camera pulls back to an overhead shot revealing the woman in the hospital gown, now eyes closed, with four lines carrying blood from her arms into the mobile phones being held by the masked figures. The film ends with the phrase “Nous sommes devenus des poissons rouges, enfermés dans le bocal de nos écrans. . .” (“We have become goldfish, locked in the bowl of our screens”), which is attributed to Bruno Patino, French journalist and author of *The Civilization of the Goldfish* (Patino 2019).

Unlike “Water of Life”, “I Am Freedom” directly addresses the effects of technology on culture and activism in that the young people are not being encouraged by the media to resist oppression, nor are the people around the bed bonding together in a meaningful way. The mobile phones the young people are typing on around Freedom’s bed are not being used to communicate with each other or create space for activism. The texts go by too quickly to read all of them, but the ones that are shown to the viewer are ordinary communications about the sharing of pictures and phone numbers. The “news feed” that one phone user is scrolling through also appears to be ordinary, with one post partially readable around scrolling thumbs showing images of pain au chocolate and another post about the completed loaves and a traditional recipe. The next post scrolling by quickly reads “nous sommes tombe dans des politique qui n avaient plus rien de scientifique. La voix de la science a ete captee par le politique”, which, translated, reads “we fell into politics that no longer had anything scientific about them. The voice of science has been picked up by politics”. This posting makes sense considering that the source is the infectiologist Katrina Lacombe and that the timing of the film was 2021, during debates over science and COVID vaccination. But the phone user does not react to this posting, scrolling by it to another post by a French museum showing a pistol once owned by Napoleon. The mobile phone user scrolls through the posts quickly, not pausing over anything or seeming to connect with any one message, even the one aimed at political activism. The entire film is about how such technology, instead of creating meaningful connection, increases insularity (“goldfish, locked in the bowl of our screens”) and shallow self-obsession.

“I Am Freedom” is less directly about neocolonialism than “Water of Life”, but its critique of the mobile phone, which again requires dangerous mining connected to neocolonial exploitation, brings the film into conversation with other postcolonial texts. The problematic and even exploitative mobile phone distracts the young people from Freedom’s predicament (in the hospital, they ignore her completely for their mobile phones); and the mobile phones sap Freedom’s lifeblood while keeping the masses entertained with less serious issues, a metaphor not needing unpacking. I should also note that the Africans using the mobile phones, all of them with dark brown skin, are texting in French, the former colonizer’s language, which some would say is a neocolonial issue in itself. As well, blood in Africa also carries valences of neocolonialism in the AIDS pandemic and the so-called “blood diamonds” named for the exploitative diamond mining in some African nations. Both “Water of Life” and “I Am Freedom” in their own ways critique neocolonialism and the technology upon which the contest depends.

Yet, “I Am Freedom” and “Water of Life” only exist because of mobile phone technology, and the moment of self-expression and resistance achieved through the two films is dependent on mobile phone technology and new media, including YouTube, which does bring a global viewership. In fact, this essay’s author would not have seen these films if not through a Google search that brought them to her attention. New media allowed these new voices to express their thoughts on these serious themes and for them to be seen by

audiences literally worldwide, which is, we should not forget, a significant development. Yet, one wonders about the more widespread use of new media. “I Am Freedom” suggests that new media is more of a distraction from than a tool for the hard work of postcolonial development. And “Water of Life” suggests that all technology is more often used against than by brown-skinned Africans.

By pressing against some of the stated aims of the festival to enable new voices and new moments of expression, these films reveal a tension between the films and the festival, which is the tension between new media being empowering and democratizing while also resulting in the opposite. This tension is, I believe, inevitable, and the fact that smart young amateur African filmmakers are recognizing this dichotomy should give viewers hope about their abilities to use the tools that are available (film festivals, YouTube, and mobile phones) for their own activism to challenge harmful ideologies and change the thoughts and actions of others. Each of these films that take on a serious theme is activist-oriented, and the technologies that are used, whatever one thinks of their harms, do enable these texts to reach global audiences, which would not have been as successful in other media. Print media would not be free to circulate nor would more traditional broadcast technologies. Despite its many problems, I find the Mobile Film Festival project to be exciting and innovative, and I, for one, will keep watching and talking about these one-minute films as long as they are produced.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Other examples of social mobilization attributed to social media include Occupy Wall Street and the Hong Kong Umbrella movement. See (Bhatti and Walker 2012) for an example of popular news coverage of the “Arab Spring” in the US.
- ² For the purposes of this essay, I am going to use the terms “new media” and “social media” even though the digital technologies and tools are many and are not uniform in their purpose, audience, or use.
- ³ One might question whether these very short films are more akin to expressions of social media (short films on Tiktok in particular, but other platforms, as well) or to the more traditional genre of global film. Although this essay is more interested in these short films as part of social media, certainly connections could be made between these films and other global films, especially since they are produced for and exhibited through a film festival. Other critics have examined the venue of the film festival as potential sites of activism in a similar manner to the aim of this essay. Lindiwe Dovey’s *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals* (Dovey 2015), for instance, examines the context of the film festival and how that context can affect a film’s reception, including its work as an activist text. More specifically, Sonja Tascón and Tyson Wils’ *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject* (Tascón and Wils 2017) highlights how film festivals can create “actively engaged citizen[s] for social change” (6). Other critics have examined issues of online distribution of global films, again creating interesting connections with the subject of this essay, including Baschiera and Fisher, *World Cinema On Demand: Global Film Cultures in the Era of Online Distribution* (Baschiera and Fisher 2022).
- ⁴ Mobile Film Festival is again oriented in Africa in 2023. See <https://mobilefilmfestival.africa/en/>, accessed on 9 April 2022. Films from the prior festivals, including the 2021 PanAfrica edition, can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/mobilefilmfestival>, accessed on 17 October 2022.
- ⁵ Natalie Cowling (Cowling 2023) in “South Africa: Mobile Internet User Penetration” reports that in South Africa in 2023, for instance, 82.2% of South Africa’s population has mobile internet access through their phones; and the data team that created *The Economist’s* “Daily Chart” on 8 November 2017 showed that in much of sub-Saharan Africa, mobile phones are more common than access to electricity (Data Team 2017).
- ⁶ Prior critics have examined films by mobile camera phones and the complications of the technology and the message. “Sweeping the Globe’: Appropriating Global Media Content Through Camera Phone Videos in Everyday Life” for instance, examines how camera phones at the same time enable rths to participate in, disseminate, and yet also resist gender stereotypes of the female body (Ritter and Schonberger 2017).
- ⁷ These quotations and figures were taken from <https://mobilefilmfestival.africa/en/>, accessed on 9 April 2022, before the site switched over to the 2023 contest.
- ⁸ Max Schleser’s *Smartphone Filmmaking: Theory and Practice* (Schleser 2021) examines filmmaking by mobile phones as “a unique film form”, and in one chapter gives an overview of mobile film festivals like Mobile Film Festival.

- ⁹ Lars Kamer in “Average Price for Mobile Data in Select African Countries 2022” says that in 2020 “19 percent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa lived in areas not covered by a mobile broadband network. Additionally, the adoption of mobile internet is not equitable, as it is more accessible to men than women as well as more spread in urban than rural areas”. Kamer, Lars, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1180939/average-price-for-mobile-data-in-africa/>, accessed on 15 January 2023 (Kamer 2022).
- ¹⁰ Youtube and how it does or does not encourage or allow activism has also been the subject of other work. “Analysis of YouTube Videos Used by Activists in the Uyghur Nationalist Movement: Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods”, for instance, examines how Youtube was used in 2008 and 2009 as a venue for disseminating videos about ethnic tensions within China, to both educate the world about these tensions and gain political traction and to create an online community of diasporic Uyghurs and their supporters (Vergani and Zuev 2011). Also see “Youtube as a Site of Debate Through Populist Politics: The Case of a Turkish Protest Pop Video” (Way 2015).
- ¹¹ Smadja mentions “social networks” as well, but the films are housed on YouTube under the Mobile Film Festival “channel” to be shared or linked through social media.
- ¹² One film won two awards, which is how seven films cover the eight awards.
- ¹³ The 2021 films have been replaced by the call for the 2023 festival on the Mobile Film Festival Africa Website, but the films can still be found individually on YouTube.
- ¹⁴ Also addressing migrancy is the Actor Award winner, “A Lost Homeland”, which shows a Syrian migrant boy facing obstacles in his new Moroccan school. The Screenplay award winner, “Asunder”, perhaps the least literal of the award winners, also contains a dark message. It shows against a stark post-apocalyptic landscape a man in a boat surrounded by burning documents and dead people of various races and religions, representing (as the film’s description explains) “the destiny of a society without coexistence”.
- ¹⁵ The film is of high quality, with the split screen effect and the choral soundtrack being seamlessly integrated, yet this filmmaker, Tunisian Souhaib Dakhlaoui, at the point of this essay’s publication has no other online presence, forwarding the conclusion that he was/is an amateur.
- ¹⁶ These translations come from the online Urban Dictionary, urbandictionary.com. “Shombie” is a portmanteau. The Urban Dictionary lists several combinations that create the word “shombie” including “shadow zombie”, “shit zombie”, and “shopping zombies”. The first and third definitions make the best sense in this context.

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