Digital Methods and Democratic Development:
Acquiring and acting on user generated content during national elections

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Digital content, especially over social media platforms, has profoundly altered how some communities engage in political and social communication and action. We have been building tools that facilitate the aggregation of user generated content across multiple media types, the evaluation and analysis of this content, and systems for real-time response. We also have developed tools for post-hoc analysis of these textual datasets. Our Aggie platform has been deployed during times of social and political action, especially national elections, in African and Latin American countries. In this talk I will review our platform and methods and overview findings that social media may help to overcome scarcity of information during the electoral process, leading to increased transparency and reduced tension. Furthermore, social media based monitoring shows encouraging signs of robustness concerning information quality and mobility. I'll then describe an analysis of Twitter discourse during three African national elections. Tweets were coded for their degree of rich policy relevant debate versus identity driven communications focused on religion, tribe and regional difference. These findings suggest that social media discussions may echo the democratic intensity found in a country with deeper democracies favoring policy relevant discussions. I'll end with a description of the challenges with this type of trans-border research collaboration and how these challenges are being embraced at the United Nations University Institute on Computing and Society (UNU-CS).