China, Africa, and the West: A Geopolitical Assessment of Huawei's Crisis Communication on Social Networks

STEFANO CALZATI
Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia

The article explores China–Africa relations in the context of ICTs through the lenses of social networking sites (SNSs). By focusing on sub-Sahara Africa (SSA), and Kenya in particular, the goal is to analyze how the Chinese company Huawei—the first to access Kenya's market in 1998—has used Facebook and Twitter during the outbreak of the crisis that followed the decision of the United States in May 2019 to ban Huawei's services and products. Drawing on existing literature on crisis communication, the analysis of various Huawei accounts at the global, interregional, and state levels shows that the company tends to implement a farraginous communication strategy across platforms and accounts. Ultimately, the communication on SNSs tends to reflect asymmetric geopolitical power relations between developed and developing countries, exemplified by Kenya's marginalization as far as the communication of the crisis is concerned in comparison with other global or Western-related accounts.

Keywords: China–Africa relations, ICTs, social networks, crisis communication

This article considers social networking sites (SNSs) as virtual arenas where (global) geopolitical tensions can be reflected and profitably analyzed, especially in matters related to ICTs, which are the infrastructure presupposing the very existence of SNSs in the first place. The article takes the U.S.–Huawei crisis over Huawei's ban—following the United States decision, in May 2019, to put the Chinese company on an "entity list"—as a casus belli through which to investigate such geopolitical tensions. Notably, this will be done studying Huawei's crisis communication strategy on various accounts on Facebook and Twitter. Instead of taking a side—United States or China—the analysis is primarily focused on Huawei's SNS accounts dedicated to sub-Sahara Africa (SSA), a region that, because of its economic and demographic growth, is emerging as a new ICT pole, largely thanks to Western and Chinese investments.

The SNS accounts analyzed show a three-layered geopolitical segmentation: (1) global, (2) interregional, and (3) state level. Through a high-level content analysis, the goal is to assess how these

Stefano Calzati: stefano.calzati@taltech.ee

accounts can be said to mirror or rework existing geopolitical power relations among China, SSA, and Western countries. Particular attention is devoted to Kenya, the first African country where Huawei launched its activities back in 1998 anticipating Western competitors, and the United Kingdom, the first country in Europe to give permission to deploy Huawei's 5G network.

The major contributions of the article are (1) to integrate the literature on crisis communication with new insights concerning the online realm and with specific regard to a major Chinese company, so as to move beyond the predominant West-centeredness of existing studies, and (2) to look at China–Africa relations in the ICTs within a global context by capitalizing on the diffusion of SNSs as data-rich arenas.

The article is structured as follows: (1) I outline China–SSA relations, with specific regard to the ICT sector. (2) I survey existing literature on crisis communication. (3) I offer a brief diachronic excursus about the U.S.–Huawei crisis. (4) I describe the methodology adopted for this study. (5) I present the data collected from Huawei's various accounts on both Facebook and Twitter. (6) I discuss the findings by framing them into a broader geopolitical contextualization. (7) I introduce the limitations and potential further developments of the study.

China–SSA Relations and the Rise of the Region as an ICT Pole

Although considered until recently "black holes of informational capitalism" (Castells, 1998, p. 162), SSA countries have witnessed, however nonuniformly, a recent boom in ICTs (Graham & Foster, 2016; Graham & Mann, 2013). This means that the digital economies of those low-income regions that have so far remained at the margins of public discourse are increasingly catching up with high-income developed regions.

When ICTs are framed within a geopolitical perspective, the risk of new forms of power asymmetry, connecting developed and less developed regions of the world, emerges. Literature providing insights into the global geopolitical tensions that permeate ICTs' governance is consolidated. Studies have shown the "misalignment" between the Internet as a commons infrastructure and the legitimacy of sovereign powers (Mueller, 2019), the crystallization of two doctrines—multistakeholderism and multilateralism—of which the United States and China are said to be the major exponents (Nonnecke, 2016), and the shifting toward a federated multipolar scenario (Winseck, 2017).

Although these works are relevant, this article concentrates on the communication unfolded on the SNS platforms supported by the Internet, which are regarded as a higher, yet connected, level on which geopolitical tensions affecting ICTs can be investigated. Linnet Taylor (2014), for instance, has warned about the possibility of seeing a new "scramble of Africa," aimed at controlling the deluge of ICT-derived data of the continent. In this respect, most significant is the lack of agency to which Africa, African institutions, and African people are usually subjected (Mohan & Lampert, 2013; Taylor, 2014; Taylor & Broeders, 2015). These studies show a colonially tainted asymmetry with the Global North, which relegates African countries and people to a subaltern role when, instead, there is an urgent need to not only "Africanize technology" (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019, p. 22) but also empower African actors as well as African ICT users.

After a gradual increase since the early 2000s, from 2015 onward, the United States has diminished its foreign direct investment (FDI) in SSA (Statista, 2020a). In 2019, the Trump administration declared that the U.S. international Development Finance Corporation (DFC) would invest $60 billion in Africa, with the precise intention of "providing a robust alternative to the Chinese debt-heavy model that can leave developing countries worse off" (Forde, 2019, para. 8).

Different from the top-down aid-based approach of Western powers, China is said to exert a soft power approach for Africa by establishing peer-to-peer relations at continent as well as at state levels. These relations often promote aid and investments "with no strings attached" (Gagliardone, 2019; Zhang, 2013), meaning that China is committed to developing African infrastructure and services in many sectors by fostering bilateral agreements that keep African parties in business and involve local authorities and workforces, tailoring the investments on their needs.[2]

Two layers of cooperation between China and Africa can be singled out: multilateral (pan-African) and bilateral (state to state). In the 2015–18 plan that followed the 5th Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), it was announced the strategic decision to turn the Forum on China–Africa Media Cooperation into an official sub-forum of FOCAC. This shift highlights the extent to which both China and African countries consider ICTs as a crucial sector of their mutual cooperation. Beyond this pan-African framework, it is increasingly clear that China is committed to foster bilateral agreements with individual African states. As Gagliardone (2019) writes,

> A continental overview of China's engagement in the ICT sector corroborates the impression that China is not trying to impose a blueprint in shaping information societies in Africa. Rather, [it] has produced specific and individual responses in different African countries. (p. 56)

China's presence in Kenya's ICT sector has become strong (Oreglia, 2012). Here, Huawei—the major Chinese private ICT company—provides both backbone and last mile solutions. Huawei began its African investments in Kenya in 1998, anticipating the advent of other American and European actors. Currently, Huawei oversees Phase 2 of the National Optic Fiber Backbone Infrastructure Extension Project (NOFBI). The project is expected to link 47 counties by implementing an extra 1,600 km of fiber. Beyond that, Huawei has gradually expanded its investments in the country, encompassing not only infrastructures and products but also corporate social responsibility projects. Among these, the company is especially committed to promote knowledge transfer by training ICT-savvy graduates through its ICT academy programs. The long-lasting and diversified presence of Huawei in Kenya, and its partnership with the strong local subsidiary Safaricom, has given the Chinese company an edge over competitors such as Airtel Networks Kenya (owned by Indian Bharti Airtel) and Telkom Kenya (Orange).

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[2] The extent to which this approach is burdening African states with unaffordable long-term debt, however, remains contentious.

Facebook and Twitter: Features and Contextualization in SSA

Facebook and Twitter are two widely used SNSs. Currently, Facebook is by far the most popular SNS globally. In fact, at the end of 2019, Facebook counted 2.45 billion active users each month (Statista, 2020b). Twitter, on the other hand, had 330 million active monthly users. The breaking down of these data in terms of demographics shows a parallelism by age: the majority of users on both Facebook (57%) and Twitter (54%) are between the ages of 18 and 34 years (Statista, 2020c, 2020d). However, Twitter is especially popular among powerbrokers, celebrities, and political leaders, whereas Facebook appeals to a transversal audience (Carter, 2018). This is due to the different functionalities and relations that the two platforms support. Facebook is a space that favors the building of symmetric relations among users (Halpern, Valenzuela, & Katz, 2017; Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012), while Twitter is a less reciprocal space promoting asymmetric relationships (Davenport, Bergman, Bergman, & Fearrington, 2014; Kwon, Park, & Kim, 2014; Logan, 2014). This also means that Facebook privileges the peer-to-peer social side of sharing, whereas Twitter's communication is conceived as a largely top-down delivery of information (also due to characters' limitation). Moreover, Twitter fosters a much faster communicative environment than Facebook does, though the latter foregrounds deeper engagements with one's friends' network (Carter, 2018). Research delving into the profiles of users on the two platforms (Hughes, Batey, Rowe, & Lee, 2012) finds that Twitter's followers resort to the platform for consciously looking for information, whereas Facebook's users tend to use the platform for less conscientious and more socialized (i.e., accommodating) sharing of opinions.

When it comes to the penetration of SNSs in SSA, South Africa often plays a leading role. However, Kenya also shows increasing digits. In South Africa, 40% of the population is actively making use of SNSs, whereas Kenya (16%) comes just behind Ghana (19%) as one of the countries in SSA with the highest rate of SNSs penetration (We Are Social, 2019). Most importantly, most of these Kenyan users (15%) access these platforms through their smartphones, signaling a predominant preference for mobile over household connections. Looking closely at Facebook and Twitter, we can see that 88.5% of Kenyans actively using SNSs resort to Facebook, and 31% (the relative majority) resort to it for getting information. Twitter is used by the 27.9% of the population active on SNSs, well ahead of LinkedIn (9.3%), which is Twitter's main competitor in the professional realm. Remarkably, among the Kenyan population aged 21 to 35, Twitter is more used than Facebook: between the ages of 26 and 35, 39.3% of users adopt Twitter, whereas only 34.6% adopts Facebook (SIMElab, 2018), thus signaling the strong and balanced penetration of both platforms in the country.

Crisis Communication on SNSs

For a company or organization, a crisis can be defined as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). Hence, the ability of a company to promptly react on the public stage to a situation of crisis is deemed as strategic for its survival and the minimizing of the impact that such a crisis can have on its reputation (Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010).

In this context, SNSs constitute a double-edged tool: on the one hand, they are platforms allowing for fast communication to be spread globally with little external gatekeeping (González-Herrero & Smith,

2008; Taylor & Perry, 2005); on the other hand, because of the interactivity and virality they promote (Sung & Hwang, 2014; Xia, 2013), SNSs can enhance companies vulnerability, especially in the case of a wrongly shaped message (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015), a delayed response, or a lack of it altogether (Park, 2017). Only a few studies have examined how SNSs can be effectively used in crisis communication (e.g., Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Ki & Nekmat, 2014; Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016; Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011). Most of these studies focus on Western companies (Park, 2017), or they concentrate on one single SNS at the time (Bossetta, 2018).

Coombs (2007, p. 168) proposes a categorization of the crises that a company may face. According to this categorization, the crisis that hit Huawei can be considered "accidental"—that is, a crisis that poses "challenges" due to "stakeholders claim[ing] that the organization is operating in a inappropriate manner." The United States banned Huawei's technology on grounds that it may have threatened national security. At the same time, Huawei might also be regarded, always according to Coombs' categorization, as a "victim" in that the company is made the object of "rumors," notably about the alleged harmfulness of its technology. Both positions relate to a situation in which Huawei can bear little responsibility for the outbreak of the crisis. Coombs also proposes a taxonomy of crises' responses based on the above categorization. Notably, he suggests that the more a company is responsible for the crisis, the more it should adopt accommodating responses, along the scale that goes from "denial" (minimal degree of responsibility), "diminishing" and "rebuilding" (maximum degree of responsibility), up to "bolstering," when the company tries to turn the tables and take advantage of the crisis. Studies (Ki & Nekmat, 2014; Roshan et al., 2016) that applied Coombs's framework both online and off-line show that companies tend to adopt "justification" and "full apology" strategies to cope with crises.

Chronology of a Crisis

The crisis between Huawei and the United States reached a peak on May 15, 2019, when the Trump administration officially banned Huawei from selling its products in the United States, via a security order. A long trail of events anticipated such peak.

On December 6, 2018, Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou is arrested in Canada at the request of the United States, over allegations of having breached the sanctions to Iran. This episode marks escalating tensions between the two parts, with the Chinese company being accused by the United States of trade secret theft and fraud (January 19). At the center of the crisis is, at once, a commercial and political wrestling: the rollout by Huawei of 5G networks around the globe, on the one hand, and the security implications that such an endeavor could have, on the other hand. At the beginning of February 2019, the U.S. government suggested to its European allies to prevent the deployment of Huawei's technology. Such a call received mixed responses: For instance, the Italian government temporarily stopped the rollout of the 5G network (end of February); in the UK—the first country in Europe planning to implement Huawei 5G[3]— the risk of using Huawei's technology was deemed "manageable" (February 17); in Germany, instead, the United States' warning was publicly addressed by governmental figures as an undue interference (March

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[3] At the time of the last revision of this article (July 2020) the UK government has suspended Huawei's deployment of its 5G network across the country. This decision further stresses the global geopolitical tensions underpinning ICTs and its services.

19). Lastly, on April 30, Vodafone reportedly found hidden backdoors in Huawei devices, which strengthened the United States' decision to enforce a ban on Huawei's technology two weeks later.

In the meantime, some U.S. companies found themselves playing an in-between role as both Huawei's commercial partners and U.S. actors bound to national "duties." Hence, whereas, for instance, Google cut off Huawei phones from future Android updates after the enforcing of the ban (May 19), and Facebook similarly prevented Huawei from preinstalling the app on its mobile phones (June 7), by the end of June, some U.S. companies were bypassing the ban, with FedEx suing the U.S. Commerce Department, Microsoft selling Huawei's laptops, and Google warning the Trump administration that a Huawei ban would constitute a national security risk.

In some respects, though, the ban did affect Huawei's activities and strategy. The rollout of the 5G network was delayed, with countries in Europe calling out for a 5G security proposal (May 5); the company's revenues had to face potential losses, and, above all, Huawei was urged to accelerate the development of its own operating system. After denying and postponing this news, the Chinese company released its Android replacement—Harmony—on August 10, 2019.

Methodology

The article concentrates on the following Huawei accounts on both Facebook and Twitter: Huawei, Huawei Southern Africa, Huawei Kenya. Huawei UK on Twitter is also taken into account to complement the analysis (no similar account on Facebook). Overall, the monitoring of the crisis communication went from May 15 (when the U.S. ban was enforced) to August 10 (i.e., when Huawei announced the release of Harmony, its own mobile's operating system).

All posts on all accounts were coded depending on the geopolitical dimension of their content. Three main dimensions were identified: "global" (i.e., posts addressing political issues with a macro geopolitical outreach); "interregional" (i.e., posts relating to a meso geopolitical framework, be it SSA, Europe, Asia, or the Americas); "state level" (i.e., posts delving into state-level issues, such as the U.S., the UK, or SSA countries, especially Kenya). Beyond that, the coding looked specifically for posts that addressed the U.S.–Huawei crisis, or that had a more broad political connotation, such as posts dealing with national and international cybersecurity, data protection, state–corporate agreements, U.S.–China, China–Europe, or China–Africa relations. Political post examples include one by Huawei Kenya on Facebook (July 17), which reported the state's decision to allow Huawei's rolling out of its 5G network; similarly, the Huawei account on Twitter (May 17) reported the UK decision to allow the deployment of Huawei's 5G technology, after a temporary halt. The political connotation of the posts does not depend on their content, in that a post that calls, for instance, for a global governance on technology might have a commercial or political relevance depending on the source and/or the context of that call. Hence, the political connotation required a qualitative assessment of all posts. By contrast, it was easier to identify posts that dealt with the crisis because they mentioned expressly the U.S. ban imposed on Huawei. An example is a post on Huawei Kenya, on Facebook (May 21), in which it is claimed that "Kenyan market will be unshaken despite U.S. trade ban."

For each post, the numbers of "likes," "comments," and "shares" were recorded, to give an overview on (1) which posts stirred most engagement on each account and depending on the SNS platform used, and (2) how the communication of the crisis was received by users across accounts and platforms. Users' comments to the crisis underwent a sentiment analysis conducted on a single post, dated May 29, which was reshared by Huawei across all accounts and platforms (except from Huawei Kenya, on Facebook) and which triggered the strongest engagement (i.e., total of likes, comments, and shares) during the period surveyed. Note that on Facebook this post was the target of bots, which became predominant after the 350th comment. Hence, these comments were not taken into consideration for the sentiment analysis. On Twitter, by contrast, the post did not attract any bots' comments, keeping the discussion more focused. On both platforms, the qualitative assessment revealed that neither was expressly the result of a troll intervention. This, however, was less of a concern for the analysis because even if some comments were from trolls, it would have been nonetheless significant to include them for a better understanding of how a multinational such as Huawei deals with this drawback of online communication.

Huawei on SNSs

Huawei has launched accounts on both Facebook and Twitter. These can be differentiated geographically (e.g., continents, regions, states) or thematically (e.g., "mobile," "IT service," "Enterprise," "Facts"). For the present analysis, attention was focused on the general Huawei accounts, the Huawei Southern Africa accounts,[4] and the Huawei Kenya accounts on both Facebook and Twitter, as well as on Huawei UK on Twitter. For a general overview (see Table 1), the accounts Huawei Mobile and Huawei Mobile Kenya were also considered. Table 1 singles out the date of creation for each account, the current number of followers (as of September 2019), and, in the case of Twitter, the overall number of tweets and likes for each account (Facebook does not openly provide such data):

Table 1. The Surveyed Huawei Accounts on Facebook and Twitter
(Source: Facebook and Twitter Accounts).

	Huawei		Huawei Mobile		Huawei Southern Africa		Huawei Kenya		Huawei Mobile Kenya		Huawei UK	
	FB	TW	FB	TW	FB	TW	FB	TW	FB	TW	FB	TW
Date Creation	June 2009	Dec. 2009	July 2011	July 2010	Feb. 2019	Jan. 2018	July 2014	Mar. 2019	No account	June 2012	No account	Nov. 2016
Followers	1.5 million+	700k+	57 million+	500k+	100k+	31k+	3000+	300+	n.a.	8000+	n.a.	16k+
Posts	n.a.	13k+	n.a.	19k+	n.a.	500+	n.a.	100+	n.a.	7000+	n.a.	n.a.
Likes	n.a.	600+	n.a.	3000+	n.a.	200+	n.a.	50+	n.a.	600+	n.a.	n.a.

[4] The collection of the data was done in September 2019. Since mid-November, the Southern Africa account on Facebook has been taken down (it remains on Twitter). As will emerge more clearly during the analysis, this is symptomatic of the fact that Huawei's communication strategy on SNSs is not integrated, but subject to a degree of autonomy and/or fuzziness across accounts and platforms.

Overall, Huawei, Huawei Mobile, and Huawei Mobile Kenya on Twitter are by far the most active accounts. By comparing the accounts Huawei and Huawei Mobile, we can see that Huawei launched firstly its company pages, and later the pages dedicated to its products. Regarding Africa, the launch of various Huawei accounts shows a reversal. The priority was given to mobile products and later to the company itself. This choice aligns with the data introduced above about Kenyans' preferred devices for accessing the Internet, with smartphones being clearly ahead of laptop and desktop computers. Interestingly, however, Huawei Mobile Kenya has no Facebook account, which is an idiosyncratic choice in at least two respects. On the one hand, it is at odds with the number of followers on both platforms across all accounts, which clearly show a predominance of Facebook over Twitter. On the other hand, Huawei Kenya on Facebook shows several user comments asking specific questions about Huawei's upcoming products, thus manifesting the necessity of such a page. Significantly, the Huawei Kenya accounts each on Twitter and Facebook are almost five years apart. Postings reveal, however, that the Facebook account has been regularly active since March 2019, thus aligning with its Twitter counterpart.

Overall, at a micro level (i.e., Kenya), the launch of SNS accounts occurred late, especially when compared with the launch of the other accounts of the company, including Huawei UK (November 2016 vs. March 2019 on Twitter). At the macro and meso levels, the Southern Africa accounts stand as an intermediate conceptualization negotiating among the global, continental, and various state levels. This suggests that, at least online, a third dimension—beyond the pan-African and state-level—intervenes in the company's overall unfolding of its communication strategy. It is therefore interesting to see how Huawei coordinated the crisis communication across these three dimensions on both platforms and the consequent engagement by users.
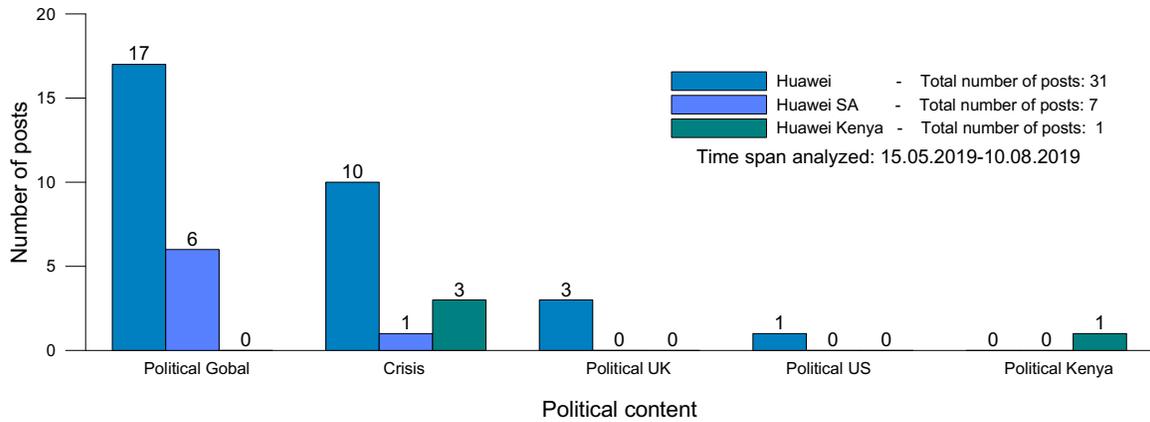
Huawei Crisis Communication on Social Networks

Table 2 summarizes the number of posts with political content (including the crisis) on each platform and for each account, during the surveyed period.
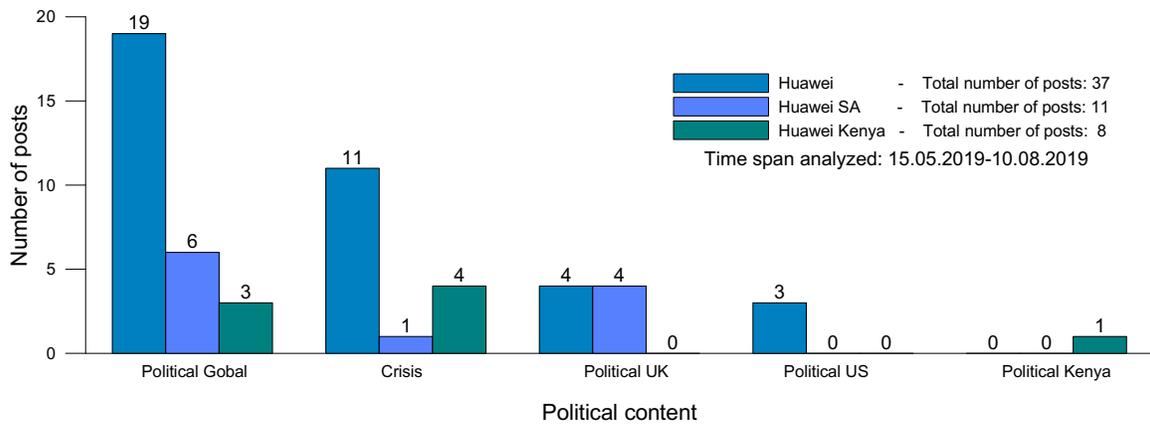
Table 2. Number of Political Posts on Each Facebook and Twitter Account.

	Huawei		Huawei Southern Africa		Huawei Kenya	
	FB	*TW*	*FB*	*TW*	*FB*	*TW*
SNS/N° Posts						
	31	37	7	13	4	8

Figures 1 and 2 show the different geopolitical dimensions of the political posts coded on Facebook (Figure 1) and Twitter (Figure 2). On Facebook, the Huawei account is the most politicized and addresses the crisis more overtly. Here, 21 posts discussing political issues and 10 posts dealing directly with the crisis were retrieved; while on Twitter, there were 26 and 11 posts, respectively. Huawei Southern Africa, on Facebook, had six political posts and only one addressing the crisis. On the other hand, on Twitter, 12 posts were political and one addressed the crisis. Concerning Huawei Kenya, on Facebook, three posts focused on the crisis and one was political with a state outreach, whereas on Twitter, four posts were devoted to the crisis and four were political (three of which with a global outreach).

Figure 1. Breakdown of political posts on Huawei, Huawei Southern Africa, and Huawei Kenya Facebook accounts.

Figure 2. Breakdown of political posts on Huawei, Huawei Southern Africa, and Huawei Kenya Twitter accounts.

The stronger politicization of Twitter (*n* = 58) in comparison with Facebook (*n* = 42) goes against previous studies (Bossetta, 2018; Halpern et al., 2017), according to which Facebook is the most preferred SNS for sharing political content and/or political ads by public figures, public pages, and users.[5] This discrepancy might be because Huawei considered the crisis as a business-related matter, thus fitting more with Twitter than with Facebook, and one in which the company wanted to maintain the upper hand with regard to its communication, a feature favored by the asymmetric relationships with users that Twitter promotes in comparison with Facebook. Beyond that, findings suggest that the crisis was perceived and dealt with by Huawei as an international crisis (i.e., moving beyond the clash with the United States). Most posts dedicated to the crisis are found on Huawei's general accounts. The international dimension of the

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[5] This preference will likely be exacerbated by Twitter's decision (different from Facebook) to ban all political ads, starting from mid-November 2019 (during the collection of the data, this ban had not yet been enforced).

crisis is also reasserted by the fact that on all accounts, only one and three posts respectively on Facebook (*n* = 1) and Twitter (*n* = 3) addressed the company's bilateral relations with the United States, whereas three and four (Facebook *n* = 3; Twitter *n* = 4) addressed Huawei–UK relations on each SNS.

When looking closer at the African context through the accounts Huawei Southern Africa and Huawei Kenya, it is significant that the former is more politicized (Facebook *n* = 6 vs. *n* = 1; Twitter *n* = 10 vs. *n* = 4), but on Huawei Kenya the crisis surfaces more (Facebook *n* = 1 vs. *n* = 3; Twitter *n* = 1 vs. *n* = 4). This discrepancy requires further explanation. The only post dedicated to the crisis on Huawei Southern Africa accounts was the one dated May 29. Interestingly, this post was shared across all accounts and platforms surveyed, except Huawei Kenya on Facebook (though it appeared on Twitter). The post contains the press conference's video of Song Liuping (Huawei's chief legal officer), who condemned the U.S. ban against Huawei "based only on speculation" and calls for a readdress by the U.S. judicial system. The post is rather audacious—one that, according to Coombs's (2007) taxonomy of crisis responses, could well represent a bolstering posture, which implies "explaining how the organization is a victim of the crisis."
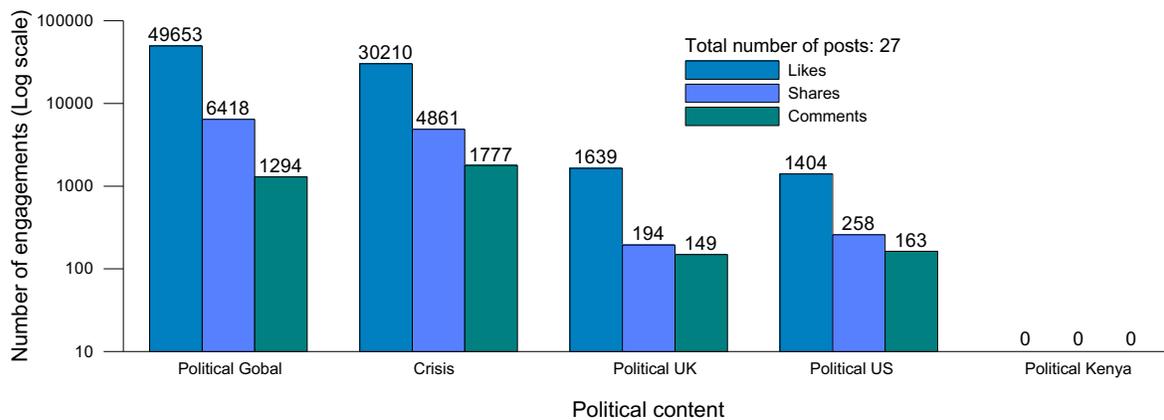
On the Huawei Kenya account on Facebook, by contrast, we found three posts (present also on Twitter), but no mention of the press conference. One post, dated May 21, was specifically dedicated to the Kenyan dimension, with an article from the newspaper *The Star,* in which it was reported that the Kenyan market would not be affected by the U.S. ban. To this a similar post, reshared from Huawei Mobile, followed (May 21). Here, the company reassured its African and Kenyan costumers—as a response to Google blocking all updates on Huawei's mobiles—about its past and ongoing commitment toward Android innovation. Lastly, on May 29, a further reshared post from Huawei Mobile was meant to simply "thank" African and Kenyan costumers for their support. Similar to the post dedicated to the press conference, these posts can be regarded as part of a bolstering posture, in that they "remind stakeholders about past good works" and "praise stakeholders" (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). However, different from the Huawei Southern Africa and Huawei accounts, here the crisis is localized (i.e., it is tailored on a state-level dimension), thus discussing not much its resonance for the global stage, but its impact on Kenya's users.

This idea is further confirmed by going back a few days on the Huawei Kenya timeline on Facebook. On May 10 there is a post reshared from Huawei Facts in which Safaricom—Huawei's main partner in Kenya—confirmed its commitment to stick with its Chinese ally, regardless of the evolution of the crisis. This means that while the crisis was almost entirely omitted from the interregional dimension, it emerged on Kenya's accounts and did so foregrounding its state dimension and the bilateral relations between Huawei and Safaricom. At the same time, however, coupling this with the fact that the account Huawei Kenya on Facebook was the sole account on which the press conference was not reshared, it appears more neatly the extent to which both the Southern Africa and the Kenya accounts were marginalized (quantitatively, the former; qualitatively, the latter) with regard to the communication–of the crisis.

Overall, having only one post shared across accounts and platforms is symptomatic of Huawei's tendency to avoid an integrated approach to the communication of the crisis. The communication appears rather dispersed, as if the accounts were not following a coherent strategy (or managed by different teams). This might be also interpreted as a way of "diminishing" the impact of the crisis, which is one of the postures suggested by Coombs (2007) in cases of "challenges." And yet bolstering posts portray Huawei as the victim,
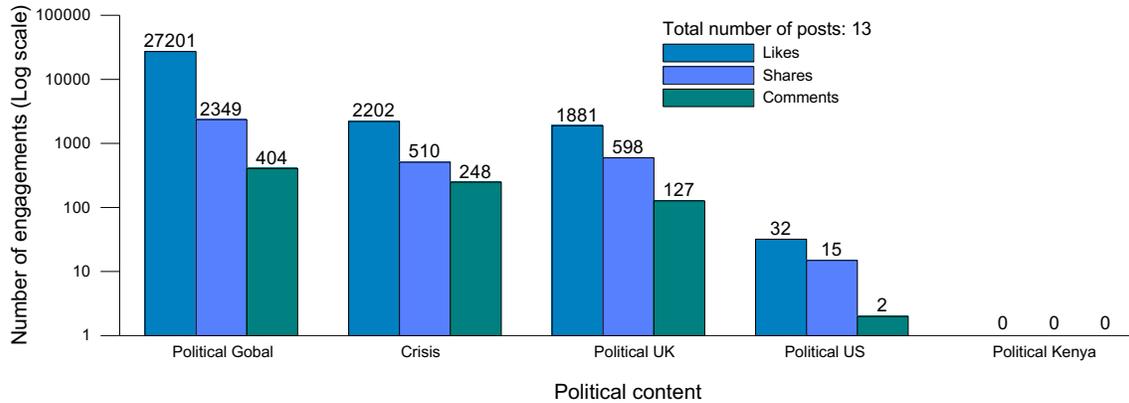
which is certainly not a minimalizing posture to the crisis. The incoherency of the overall strategy, then, arises with Huawei trying to perform both postures simultaneously and nonuniformly across platforms and accounts.

As for the engagement (likes, shares, comments) triggered by the posts dedicated to the crisis, the scenario mimics such dispersion, showing contrasting trends both between the two platforms and among the accounts. On Twitter's Huawei account, posts about the crisis ($n = 11$) are second in terms of aggregate engagement and first considering the average per post (see Figure 3).
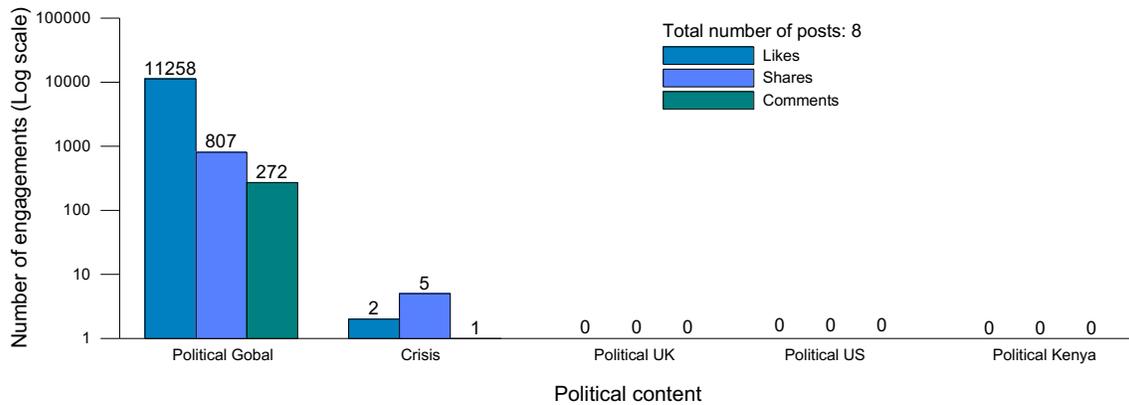

Figure 3. Engagement on Huawei Twitter account during the crisis, broken down per political content.

In a way, the crisis appeals to these users, and yet it tends to be "drowned" by other politically connoted posts with a global dimension, thus diluting the perception of the crisis as a bilateral matter. At the same time, on Huawei Southern Africa (see Figure 4), political global posts ($n = 6$) attract users' engagement the most, while the only post about the crisis ($n = 1$) comes far behind, in second position. This might be explained by the limited posting about the crisis, on the one hand, and by the users' expectations of seeing the interregional dimension inscribed within the global stage, on the other hand (which aligns to the analysis above).

Figure 4. Engagement on Huawei Southern Africa Twitter account during the crisis, broken
down per political content.

More interestingly, on Huawei Kenya (see Figure 5), political global posts ($n = 3$) catalyze the overwhelming majority of reactions, with crisis posts ($n = 4$) leaving users cold, despite posts dedicated to the crisis having a specific Kenyan focus. These contrasting trends can be regarded as a symptom of Kenyans' interest in the global political dimension, which is not addressed as much as in the other accounts, thus also questioning the efficacy of Huawei's overall communication strategy.

Figure 5. Engagement on Huawei Kenya Twitter account during the crisis, broken down per
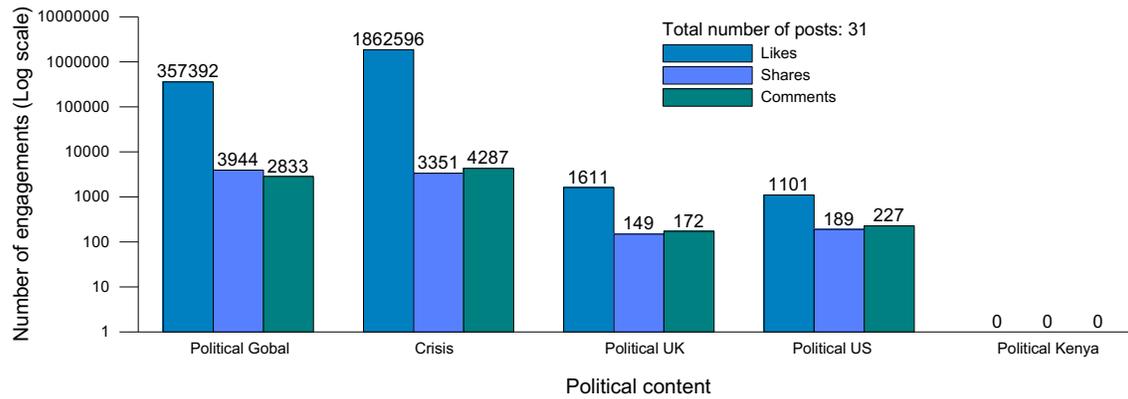political content.

The marginalization of African accounts is especially evident when comparing Huawei Kenya with another (Western) state-level account (i.e., Huawei UK; see Table 3). Here, consistently more political and crisis-related posts were recorded in comparison with Huawei Kenya. Not only was the crisis addressed more steadily over the three months ($n = 17$) but a political post was also dedicated specifically to the UK once every three days on average ($n = 30$). Put differently, the coverage that Huawei granted to the UK reflects the perceived country's pivotal role during these months (the UK is the first country in Europe to have planned the deployment of Huawei 5G) and its centrality in the company's communication strategy when

contrasted with Kenya's role, even though in Kenya Huawei launched its investments three years earlier than in the UK.

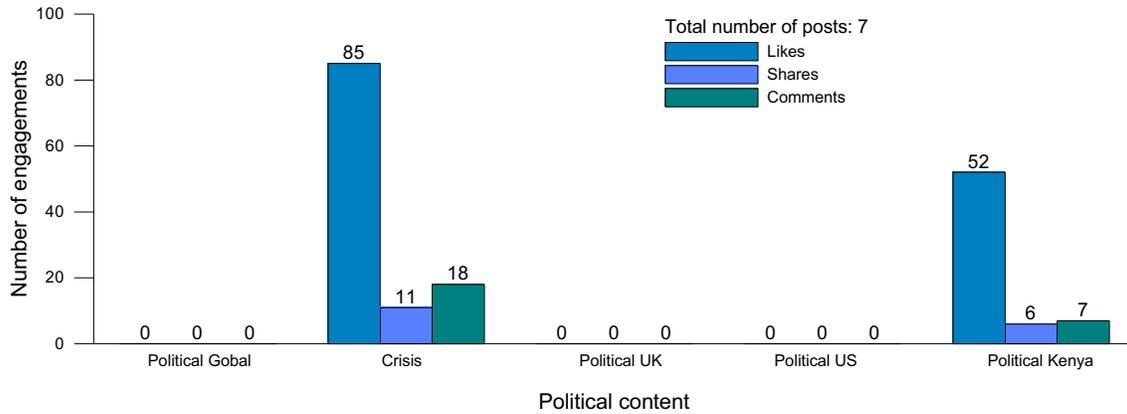**Table 3. Political Content During the Crisis on Huawei UK Twitter Account.**

Content/ N° Posts	Political UK	Crisis	Political Global
	30	17	6

The most striking trend triggered by the crisis on the Huawei, Huawei Southern Africa, and Huawei Kenya accounts on Facebook is the level of engagement (see Figure 6) on Huawei account (*n* = 10).
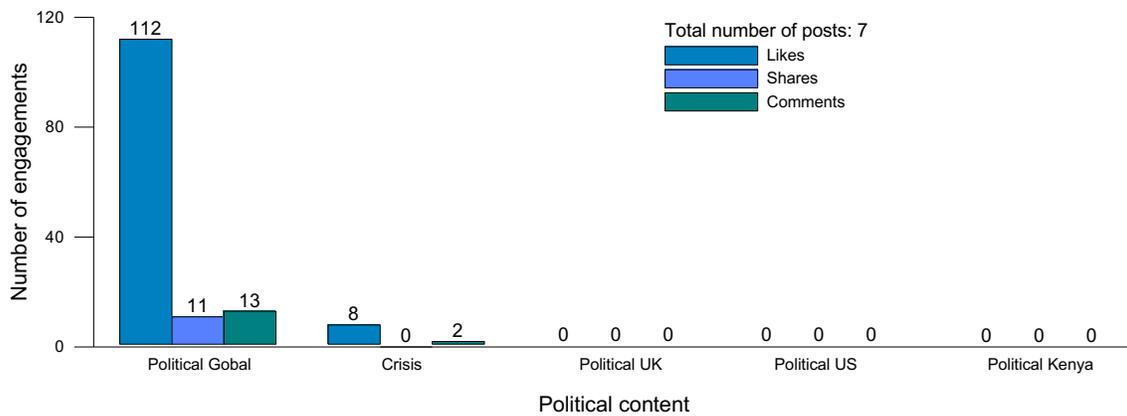

Figure 6. Engagement on Huawei Facebook account during the crisis, broken down per political content.

This engagement is far higher than that devoted to political global posts, which are the majority (*n* = 17), but also than the engagement recorded on Twitter, where political global and crisis-related posts are more copious (*n* = 19, *n* = 11) than on Facebook. This is confirmed by the Huawei Kenya account (Figure 7), on which, unlike Twitter, the crisis did stir engagement. On Huawei Southern Africa account (Figure 8), instead, the crisis seems not to appeal users, although this may be because its coverage was almost absent. The discrepancies across accounts and between platforms can be interpreted as a reflection of Huawei's incoherent approach to the communication of the crisis, in terms of quantity of posting and unevenness of distribution, with specific regard to the marginalization of SSA on Facebook.

Figure 7. Engagement on Huawei Kenya Facebook account during the crisis, broken down per political content.

Figure 8. Engagement on Huawei Southern Africa Facebook account during the crisis, broken down per political content.

Feeling the Pulse of the Crisis

Overall, a call from Facebook's Huawei users in general and Huawei Kenya users' in particular to be informed about the crisis can be detected. And yet this call did not find a full response in how Huawei managed its online communication strategy. This is also evident when reviewing comments left by the users. The two posts about the crisis dated May 21 on Huawei Kenya received respectively 44 likes and 14 comments, and 34 likes and four comments (while the third only received seven likes), reaching a relative majority of engagement. It is worth noting that in the first post the replies were a mix of concern for the future—"i wanted to buy huawei y9 but let me stop for now"; criticisms—"Actually, I wish the ban would have come earlier than this as huwawei phones are too expensive but fake"; and support/suggestion—"Start making your own os,,, and give kenyans jobs, all else iphone takes it all.". A user also pointed to the bigger picture behind the ban—

"This is not just about business it's also about data security something most of us either ignore or are unaware of. Please please read about this widely so that we make informed decisions"—to which she added a video focused on the issue of data protection, thus exhibiting a critical stance toward the crisis.

At the same time, if we look at the post on both Huawei and Huawei Southern Africa about the press conference, we see that it caused high engagement: 1.1 million likes (the majority of which are "thumbs up," followed by "heart emoji" and "surprise emoji"). To understand more about the kind of emotional response that the post caused, a sentiment analysis of the first 350 most pertinent comments (of 1,740) to this post was conducted. The selection of the comments was based on their relevancy as accorded by the Facebook algorithm. After the 350th comment, replies were clearly posted by bots—extremely repetitive and almost meaningless—which were entered to likely keep the post alive. Hence, these posts were dismissed. The sentiment analysis was conducted with Parallel Dots, a free online tool that assesses the mood of any given (natural language) text. Three moods were identified: "positive," "negative" and "neutral." The texts of the first 350 posts were collected and cleaned of images and gifs, which could not be properly interpreted by the tool. The "cleaned" text—the main languages were English, French, and Spanish, all correctly decoded by the tool—were then submitted to the machine learning algorithm. The analysis shows that the overall mood of the comments is "very positive" (89.4%), with some ranging from open support to the company ("I still support huawei from philippines," "I love Huawei. Côte d'Ivoire," "Huawei cp still the best") to others encouraging Huawei to develop its own technology ("You [USA] make Huawei work even harder for new technology hardware or software actually you are killing your own business."). It is interesting to note that the overwhelming majority of comments on Facebook came from countries belonging to the Global South, either within the African continent or beyond, such as Philippines, central Asia and India, or South America.

On Twitter, by contrast, the scenario is radically different. The three Facebook posts on Huawei Kenya that also appear on Twitter produced no comments and only a few likes. The press conference, which was shared across all accounts on Twitter, stirred a fair amount of engagement (2,200 likes and 248 comments, i.e., less than on Facebook). The sentiment analysis of all the 248 comments to this post (they were all human produced, no bots here) reveals a split scenario. Once again, the text—mainly in English— was cleaned of images and gifs and then submitted to the same tool. In this case, 48% of comments are coded as having a neutral connotation, 45.90% have a negative connotation, and only roughly 6% are positive. By reviewing the comments, it is clear that their content is more politicized than on Facebook (confirming the findings discussed earlier). The spectrum goes from users who claim that the U.S. ban is similar to China's obstruction against Facebook and Google ("Like how China banned Facebook, google & other companies??") to those who point out Huawei's enmeshment with China's authorities (e.g., "Can Huawei stop working with chinese govt because of their indiscriminate policing of chinese citizens??"). As for the provenance of these comments, while comments coming from the Global South were still the majority, they were counterbalanced by a stronger component coming from the Global North. In a way, this finding reinforces the idea that Twitter—in comparison to Facebook—is a platform that, because of its features, is more ingrained in the Western business-driven world, although this claim would need further data to be validated (and the equation Global North-West remains contentious).

Overall, it is significant that Huawei never replied to these comments (either positive or negative) on either of the two platforms. This confirms previous studies, according to which companies tend not to exploit the interactivity favored by SNSs during crises (Kinsky, Gerlich, Baskin, & Drumheller, 2014; Stenger, 2014), even though such interaction could enhance the company's positive perception by users (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Although Huawei did not follow up on comments from the users about the crisis, it took action against the ongoing rumors about the company being a technological "weapon" in the hands of the Chinese government. On August 2, close to the launch of its new operating system, Huawei opened a poll accessible on both Facebook and Twitter in which it was asked, "Who do you think owns Huawei?" The four given options were "government," "financial institutions," "consortiums," and "employees." The poll received more than 50,000 answers before being closed after a few days from its launch. Supporting the findings of the present analysis, responses were different on the two platforms. On Twitter, most voters (42%) opted for "government," whereas 26% of them voted for "employees," 17% for "financial institutions," and 15% for "consortiums." On Facebook, 77% voted for "employees" and 23% for "government." Regardless of the correct answer—which, according to Huawei, is "employees"—these data reassert the extent to which Twitter users tend to have a more critical perception of Huawei, whereas Facebook users are more positive toward the company. This is likely due to the different target of users the two platforms intercept, as well as the different use these platforms promote, as discussed by previous research (Hughes et al., 2012).

Lastly, it is remarkable that on this occasion the company answered the comments following the poll. This is particularly evident on Twitter, where Huawei's presence was more needed given the negative mood of the comments. For instance, to a user who commented, "Should it not be made more transparent that only Chinese staff 'own' Huawei as the Chinese government does not allow foreign staff to join the Employee Share Ownership Program (ESOP)," Huawei replied (somewhat off target), "Not true. Huawei is owned by employees and controlled through collective leadership. We sell civil communication products to the Chinese government and that's the extent of the relationship." Similarly, to a user who rhetorically pointed out the political objective of the poll ("Pushing this narrative pretty hard. Any particular reason?"), Huawei responded, "Yes. There are many misconceptions and unnecessary fear mongering about our ownership and governance. We're setting the facts straight." Overall, the reactivity of Huawei in answering these comments suggests that the silence following the comments to the crisis-related posts was a precise strategy (Roshan et al., 2016) rather than a lack of monitoring. It remains to be seen, however, the efficacy such silence has had on the perception of Huawei by both Facebook and Twitter users.

Discussion

By considering SNSs as virtual arenas reflecting global geopolitical struggles, this article analyzed how the Chinese company Huawei communicated on some of its Facebook and Twitter accounts about the development of the crisis caused by the U.S. ban on its products.

To move beyond a West–China dichotomy, the attention was turned to SSA—a region rapidly growing both economically and technologically, also thanks to foreign investments—and Kenya in particular, which is the first SSA country where Huawei began investing in 1998, before the advent of other Western competitors. The goal was to assess the involvement of SSA and Kenya specifically into Huawei's crisis

communication strategy for better understanding the positioning of this region and country within a global framework. To do that, beyond the accounts Huawei Kenya and Huawei Southern Africa on both Facebook and Twitter, the high-level analysis looked at the posts published on the Huawei general account as well as on Huawei UK.

Overall, the analysis showed that SSA was kept at the margins of the Huawei communication strategy. In fact, SSA and Kenya were marginalized in terms of both quantity and quality of the content posted by Huawei concerning the crisis. This is despite Huawei's long-lasting commitment in Kenya, which, as a term of comparison, began two years earlier than in the UK, a country, by contrast, kept at the center of the crisis communication strategy. One reason might be that SSA was only partially affected by the ban. Nonetheless, considering especially the attention to the crisis of Huawei Kenya's users, it is surprising how little the country and the region were integrated into the company's online communication.

Beyond that, the study showed that a further dimension is added, online, to the pan-African and bilateral state-to-state agreements characterizing China–Africa relations. This is the interregional dimension reenacted through Huawei Southern Africa accounts, which work as a link between the global dimension and the local one. However, soon after the conclusion of this study, Huawei decided to remove the Huawei Southern Africa account on Facebook (while it is still active on Twitter), albeit having been recently opened (February 2019). This shows that the company's communication strategy, far from being consolidated, keeps changing and readapting, especially at the meso level.

The analysis highlighted some interesting trends about the communication of the crisis. Twitter emerged as a more politicized platform than Facebook. This trend, which goes against existing studies, may be due to Huawei's view of the crisis as more of an international business-related matter—thus more fitting to a platform like Twitter—than one open to social assessment, a task for which Facebook would be more fit. This is despite Facebook—as shown by both the sentiment analysis and the poll launched by Huawei— offering the company stronger support from users, whereas Twitter is a space in which Huawei is much more subjected to criticism.

Second, it was advanced—based on Coombs's (2007) work—that Huawei adopted both "minimizing" and "bolstering" postures for tackling the crisis on SNSs. This also goes against existing studies, which show that companies tend to adopt "justification" and "full apology" strategies to cope with crises. Huawei's postures reflect the hybrid type of crisis it faced (i.e., one that poses "challenges" and in which Huawei is a "victim"). The postures adopted might be correct, but the communication resulted rather fragmented across platforms and accounts, suggesting the lack of a coherent strategy. Only one post was shared across the platforms and accounts surveyed, but even in this case, Huawei Kenya, on Facebook, was left out of the picture. Moreover, as suggested by previous literature, Huawei willingly refrained from interacting with users, although this might have consolidated its position during the crisis. Hence, the mixed amount of responses received both across accounts belonging to the same platform, as well as between platforms, tend to reflect Huawei's lack of a coherently integrated communication strategy.

Limitations

Although it covered the most intensive period of the crisis between Huawei and the United States, the analysis encompassed a limited period (three months). A more longitudinal approach would help further test these findings. Moreover, the analysis remained at a high level of formalism, without digging into the specific content of each political post. In this sense, to conduct a discourse analysis of all the collected posts (and their comments) might provide new insights that intersect the findings already discussed. Third, other non-Western SNSs, such as Weibo or WeChat, may be taken into account in future work, to increase the inclusiveness of the channels surveyed and their related geopolitical connotation. Fourth, no scholarly work has delved specifically into the analysis of online crisis communication by ICT companies, either Western or non-Western. The present work, albeit being focused only on one Chinese company, overtly calls for new investigations on the online communication strategies of ICT companies, which, for their very nature, should be more prone and attentive to the use of SNSs, especially in times of crisis.

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