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*The views expressed in these posts are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Democracy in Africa or the Digital Civil Society Lab.*

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY DIGITAL DEMOCRACY WILL TAKE MORE THAN TECHNOLOGY IN AFRICA

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By Nic Cheeseman, Lisa Garbe and Idayat Hassan | October 5, 2020



From the mid-2000s onwards, the digital revolution raised hopes of democratic transformation and strengthening in Africa. But it hasn't quite turned out like that. Now, almost a decade after the "[Arab Spring](#)", techno-optimism has given way to [techno-pessimism](#).

African leaders have proved able to blunt the transformative potential of smart phones through censorship and internet shutdowns. When the internet is on, social media attracts more attention for spreading fake news than preventing election rigging.

What was once thought of as “[liberation technology](#)” has turned out to be remarkably compatible with the maintenance of the status quo. Or has it? Does this more pessimistic reading overlook genuine progress?

This publication edited by Nic Cheeseman and Lisa Garbe draws together the latest research on the extent to which digital technology has changed Africa ... and the ways in which Africa is changing digital technology.

The articles show that we should not miss the wood for the trees: despite disappointment, digital technology has had profound impacts on African politics and society. But, they also highlight how much more needs to be known about digital technology on the continent.

## Digital access and inclusion

A lot of recent analysis has focused on the [digital divide in Africa](#), and the many people excluded from online access by poverty and lack of coverage.

Yet researchers have also found that closing this divide [cannot be achieved by cheaper technology alone](#). Using digital technology to access information and resources is only possible when a set of political, legal, and economic conditions are in place.

For example, the content that citizens can access increasingly depends on giant tech companies, especially for poorer citizens. In his contribution on [Facebook's Free Basics](#) – a service that provides basic online services without data charges – Toussaint Nothias explains that tech corporations’ dominant position enables them to shape how individuals use the internet under the pretence of making it more affordable.

This raises tough questions about whether multinational companies engage ethically in Africa. As Julie Owono’s contribution [points out](#), Facebook has been accused of “dumping” products such as Free Basics, stymieing the production of local alternatives. This has raised concerns of a fresh “scramble for Africa”, with multinational companies expending more energy and resources in securing new users than tackling hate speech and misinformation.

## Social media, democracy and accountability

From the recent “[virtual protest](#)” in Zambia to [#ZimbabweanLivesMatter](#), the potential of social media to empower dissenting voices is clear.

Social media is also becoming increasingly important before, during and after African elections. Idayat Hassan and Jamie Hitchen’s analysis of WhatsApp and Facebook use ahead of [elections in The Gambia](#) shows that even in rural areas with limited connectivity,

social media content contributes to offline political mobilisation. An analysis of political mobilisation during [Uganda's 2021 elections](#) by Grace Natabaalo, Lulu Jemimah, Jamie Hitchen & Eloïse Bertrand shows that politicians also actively use social media groups for campaigning – but that this is often disorganised and so new technology is not always used to maximum effect.

Similar limitations have been identified elsewhere. While social media provides important tools for digital activism from marginalised groups, such as for [anti-homophobic advocacy in Nigeria](#), online activism often lacks “[leadership, coordination and in some cases identity](#)”.

Further challenges are on the horizon.

Azeb Madebo reveals how the use of social media by the Ethiopian diaspora has [fuelled the polarisation](#) between the Oromo community on the one hand, and the Ethiopian government and Ethiopian nationalists on the other.

Not all fake news is believed of course, and it is important to keep in mind that many users are aware that they are being sent disinformation. Indeed, survey data collected by Herman Wassermann and Dani Madrid-Morales in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, shows that African citizens have much lower trust in social media than Americans. When stories play into widely held [fears, prejudices and assumptions](#), however, they can exacerbate distrust and encourage a cycle of violence.

It is, therefore, significant that there is relatively little regulation of content moderation. Julie Owono shows that in part this can be attributed to the limited local capacity of content providers such as Facebook or Twitter. Neither has invested heavily in African experts capable of identifying fake news and hate speech circulated on their platforms.

In part, it is also rooted in the limited funding available for civil society groups, considerable linguistic diversity, and the volume of information being shared. As a result, organisations such as [Africa Check](#) highlight instances of fake news but cannot hope to cover all harmful content.

## **Many questions, few answers**

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to the challenge of problematic content because when governments do try and combat free speech, Ashwanee Budoo finds that misinformation is often abused as an excuse to clamp down on [freedom of expression](#).

There is also a significant risk, according to Kofi Yeboah, that the [spread of Artificial Intelligence](#) will destabilize African politics.

These accounts highlight that there is still a lot to learn about the causes and consequences of social media. Fortunately, social media itself provides an opportunity to study political interest, discourse, or participation, as demonstrated by Khamis Mutwafi's analysis of [what Google Trends data tell us about the Tanzanian elections](#).

As Nanjala Nyabola puts it, “[the digital is changing the way we do politics and international relations](#)”, with both citizens and governments using social media to shape political discourse. Steven Feldstein predicts that neither side in will gain a decisive advantage, but rather that both sides will continuously adapt their strategies resembling a [game of cat-and-mouse](#).

The conclusion that the impact of social media is complex and ever changing is further supported by the contribution by Maggie Dwyer and Thomas Molony, which sets out some of the very different ways in which [social media is shaping political engagement](#) in Africa.

## Free speech, censorship and internet shutdowns

While growing internet coverage has enabled citizens to [challenge authoritarian rule](#), non-democratic leaders have also manipulated or disrupted online access. According to Lisa Garbe, internet shutdowns have become the “[new normal](#)” in some authoritarian states. This is especially so during politically contested periods such as [elections or major protests](#).

Moreover, while internet shutdowns are important, they are the thin end of the wedge. A number of steps have been taken to prevent citizens from being able to express themselves online. There is a growing use of [spyware across the continent](#) to snoop on government critics.

In Tanzania, restrictive laws about what can be said online go hand in hand with government pressure. A prominent lawyer [was recently fired](#) because of her “activism”.

[Uganda, Benin](#) and several other states have imposed a social media tax that has excluded many users.

Meanwhile, those who can afford internet access still face restrictions on governments information. Thus, Lisa-Marie Selvik argues that digital technology has done little to give many African citizens the right to [basic government information](#).

Challenging internet censorship, shutdowns, and surveillance is difficult but not impossible. As Michael Asiedu explains, [courts](#) can play an important role in safeguarding freedom to expression in Africa. Civil society organizations also have a critical role to play, providing citizens with guidance on digital security, such as the [Ayeta](#) toolkit described by Gbenga Sesan.

## What we know and what we don't know

Some sixteen years on since the creation of Twitter, it is becoming clear what we do and don't know about digital democracy in Africa. We know that digital technology is acting as a disruptive force that simultaneously has “[liberating](#)” and [destructive](#) potential.

The continent has yet to develop an effective way to stop the flow of fake news. And the full benefits of digital democracy are being thwarted by digital exclusion that is driven by the [high cost of data](#), the strategies of authoritarian governments, and in some cases the approach of major tech companies themselves.

But, what we don't know is just as important. We urgently need more research in a number of areas to understand "[how ICTs affect governance dynamics and how they can bring about change](#)".

To what extent has social media exacerbated ethno-regional tensions? How much online content is actually produced by governments and the trolls that work for them? Who should be responsible for content moderation and how can ethno-linguistic diversity be accounted for? What are the political and socio-economy consequences of restricting internet access, and how can this be resisted? Does the finding that how an individual behaves online [does not dramatically change](#) their offline political activity in Uganda hold more broadly? And is social media reinforcing existing gender norms rather than challenging them?

These questions should inspire the research agendas of the future.

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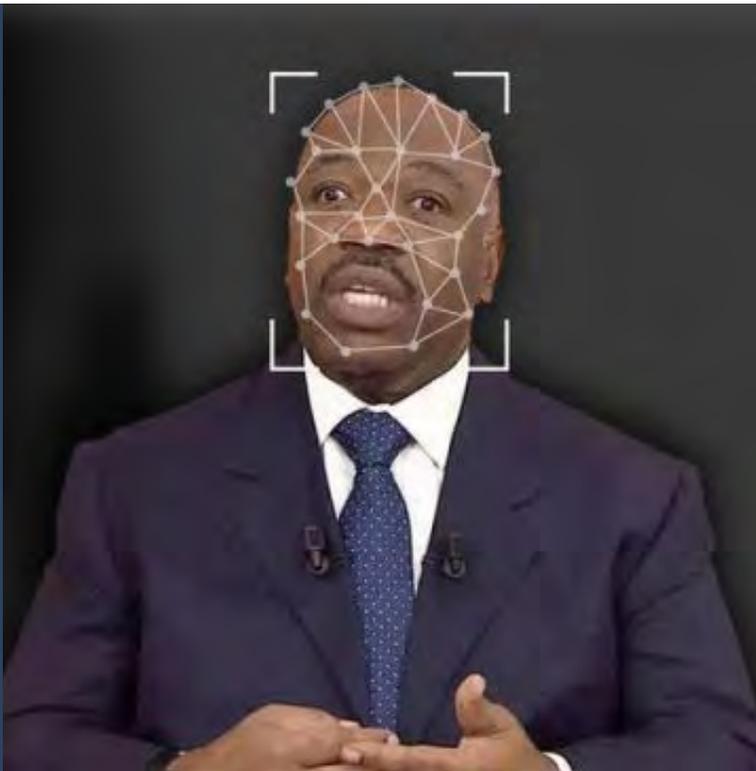
*Nic Cheeseman, Professor of Democracy, [University of Birmingham](#), [Lisa Garbe](#), Doctoral Researcher, [University of St.Gallen](#) and [Idayat Hassan](#), Director of CDD-West Africa.*

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# GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC POLICY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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By [Nanjala Nyabola](#) | October 9, 2020



The US President announces that he authorised a targeted assassination of a senior Iranian military official. The Iranian Foreign Minister announces that the country will not take this attack quietly and promises a stream of retaliatory measures. The US president promises a series of retaliations in turn, including targeting “52 cultural sites” – a gross violation of international humanitarian law. His own legislature through the House Foreign Affairs Committee denounces him: “you should read the War Powers Act. And you are not a dictator”. The Iranian Foreign Minister shares that, in violation of conventions on international organisations, he has been barred from entering the United States to attend UN high-level meetings in New York. All within the space of a week.

## Welcome to diplomacy in the age of Twitter.

The first week of 2020 was one for the ages, with political manoeuvring between the US and Iran escalating to the point of unofficial declarations of war. But the Iran US bickering was neither the beginning nor the end of this new diplomatic practice; of the leaders of powerful nations jumping on social media to take sly digs at their opponents both domestic and international.

African countries have not been left behind.



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***INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
HAS ALWAYS BEEN A FORM  
OF PERFORMANCE***

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Public practices of congratulations after an election remain common, but since 2019, presidents like Paul Biya and Ali Bongo have been forced to jump onto Facebook to prove that they are not dead, while many more have used Twitter to share updates about meetings they are taking to address COVID-19 on the continent. International relations has always been a form of performance, but in the digital age the speed and intensity of the performance has grown significantly and it is increasingly clear that the people who build these platforms are wholly unprepared for what people are using them for.

It's hard to believe that that Twitter is only thirteen years old given how central it has become to the way societies around the world are doing politics. In my book, '[Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics](#)' I go into some depth to describe how the platform has become a site for public accountability and for social mobilisation in Kenya, but I also point out the challenges that it has created.

Twitter has been central to demands for accountability from a government that loves to ignore its own people, and has created space in public discourse for Kenyans that the traditional public sphere would rather not see. None of this was in the original business plan. Social networking sites were supposed to be places where people – and especially young people – were able to connect and to share banal details of their lives. How did then did they become the epicentre for politics?

So much of what diplomats and officials do on a daily basis has historically been shrouded in secrecy. Quiet conversations at conferences, or secret meetings in lush neighbourhoods removed from the vagaries of local politics are the grist of what keeps international relations going, and the big displays of speeches and documents are often just performance of things that have already been decided. Prior to the advent of social media, traditional media

retained a tremendous amount of power to frame the conversation, or mute a person altogether by refusing to cover their speeches. Foreign diplomats and politicians, especially from countries considered marginal to powerful nations, struggled to communicate directly to the public on foreign media outlets moderated by geopolitical interests.

And this is what makes social media particularly powerful. It brings into public view what has often been shrouded in secrecy – the arrogance, the hubris, the posturing and all the unsavoury things that happen between people who have to pretend to be nice to each other for a living. First, it allows any politician with something to say and access to a smartphone and a data plan to simply say it. It is an instant podium. Second, it allows that politician to curate their audience and ensure that the people around the podium are already receptive to their messaging.



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***GOVERNMENTS AROUND THE WORLD  
HAVE INVESTED OBSCENE AMOUNTS ... TO  
ENHANCE THE ILLUSION OF POPULARITY.***

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Governments around the world have invested obscene amounts of public money on bots and paid sycophants who parrot and cheer talking points online, to enhance the illusion of popularity. Third, it allows for engagement – it makes ordinary people feel included in a space where they have always been systematically excluded. Ultimately the power of social media in this space is that it creates an unmediated symbiosis between the communicator and audiences, which traditional media does not do.

A lot of this is good. It has made international relations more visible to ordinary people and given citizens an inroad to participate in and influence public policy. But as the quality of global leadership deteriorates, so do the filters that prevent them from abusing their power to intimidate other countries – just because they can. Imagine going to bed one night and waking up the next morning to find that your president has declared war on a country half way around the world, and you now have to live under that spectre of fear and uncertainty for an unspecified amount of time.

**Even though the threats and the counter-threats are happening in the digital space, the outcomes for civilians are analogue and deadly.**

War is still war, even in the digital age. And even without an actual outbreak of violence, the threat of war can be just as disruptive and frightening as actual war, leading people for example to hoard essentials, to give up daily routines and wellness practices because they are afraid that one day bombs might start raining down from the sky. That burden still persists.

And then there is the question of deliberate, for-profit manipulation of political speech online. In the same week that the US and Iran were threatening war, a whistleblower shared – on Twitter – detailed documents from Cambridge Analytica affirming that the company had actively interfered in more than 60 elections around the world including in Kenya, and that social media manipulation was a major part of their strategy.

In 2019, after surviving a stroke Gabonese president Ali Bongo was caught out allegedly using a [deep fake video](#) to reassure the public that his health was improving. Some analysts argue that the unconvincing video inspired the military to attempt the country's first coup since 1964 given the president's frailty. The more useful social media becomes to public policy conversations, the more it will attract people who will unquestioningly sell the ability to manipulate the conversations that happen there.

There is no guarantee that social media will look the way it does today even five years down the line – the ecosystem changes rapidly and very few of the original players from 20 years ago still exist today. But the practice of conducting international relations while facing the public may be a new norm that sticks.

The digital is changing the way we do politics and international relations, and this creates a new urgency for understanding the digital ecosystem, and specifically understanding the digital rights of citizen. Who will the African citizen be in this new landscape where war is threatened on a whim and public opinion is bought at a song? These are some of the foundational questions for research on this rapidly changing terrain.

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*Nanjala Nyabola is a writer, researcher and political analyst based in Nairobi, Kenya. She is the author of "[Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya](#)" (Zed Books, 2018) and "[Travelling While Black: Essays Inspired by a Life of Travel](#)" (Hurst, forthcoming).*

# HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS CHANGING POLITICS IN AFRICA

By Maggie Dwyer and Thomas Molony | February 23, 2021



In our popular Book Club feature, Maggie Dwyer and Thomas Molony reflect on the key lessons of their important new volume on [Social Media and Politics in Africa](#). Read on for cutting edge insights into one of the most important and talked about topics in African studies.

In mid-July Chad lifted its 16-month social media ban. This [ended the longest social media blockage](#) seen in any African country. The government argued that the lengthy ban was necessary for [security reasons](#).

The Chadian case highlights the way social media has increasingly been framed as a threat, especially by authoritarian leaders. Since the beginning of 2019 at least nine other African countries have also experienced [government ordered internet shutdowns](#).

A recently published volume jointly edited by us digs deeper into this pattern. We explored the various ways social media has been entangled with politics and security. [Social Media and Politics in Africa: Democracy, Censorship and Security](#) includes cases from nine African countries. The 18 contributors to the volume include academics in Africa, Europe, North America, and Australia. Journalists and practitioners in the field of international development also contributed.

Political leaders often view social media as a threat because it can provide the public with greater access to information. It also has the potential to mobilise and challenge leadership. Some authors found ways in which digital platforms were creatively used to expand political participation.

But many authors found the opposite to be the case. In researching cases in Kenya, [Stephanie Diepeveen](#) and [Alisha Patel](#) demonstrated how social media contributed to reinforcing existing power structures and dominant narratives.

Similarly, a study by [Jean-Benoît Falisse](#) and Hugues Nkengurutse found that public political discussions on Facebook and Twitter in Burundi generally didn't include ordinary citizens. Instead, they were dominated by a small number of elites who acted as brokers.

In recent years Africa has seen the world's [highest internet penetration growth rates](#). This means that we should expect social media to play an increasingly prominent role in politics and security on the continent.

[This book](#) helps us understand the diverse and complex ways social media is shaping political engagement.

## **Social media and elections**

Three chapters are devoted to social media and elections. In them, the authors show how social media helped develop spaces for engagement and debate.

The first, by us and [Jamie Hitchen](#), found that WhatsApp was an especially important avenue for smaller political parties and new voters in Sierra Leone. The two others – one on Senegal by [Emily Riley](#), the other by researcher and lecturer [Nkwachukwu Orji](#) focusing on Nigeria – show the ways civil society organisations use social media in the hope of adding transparency to the electoral process.

Yet, these chapters each warn of the problems of “fake news” on social media. For example, Orji cautions in his Nigerian study that the absence of a strategy to address misinformation can incite election-related violence.

In addition, many government attempts to limit social media occurred during election periods or at unanticipated moments of instability. This happened in Ethiopia during the [internet shutdown following the “coup attempt”](#) in June 2019.

Other states have taken more sustained measures to curtail the use of digital platforms. Tanzania, for instance, outlaws the spreading of “false” information under its [Cybercrimes Act](#). UK academic [Charlotte Cross](#) explores the law’s origins and implementation. She also highlights the heavy burden that individuals have paid for criticising the government on social media.

## Traditional and new media

Social media’s complex symbiotic relationship with mainstream media is still evident in powerful ways.

Somalia specialist [Peter Chonka](#), for example, argues that the blurring of public and private boundaries inherent in the country’s social media environment can be disruptive. It has resulted in a lack of coherence in political communication by state actors. This further challenges their legitimacy. Tensions between traditional and modern forms of communication are reflected in the online clash of views over “appropriate” online content, moral values and perceived threats to national security.

Media scholar [Brian Ekdale](#) highlights the debates around “morality” in social media content. He researched a Kenyan government official’s attempts to block a local art collective’s music video that had been uploaded to YouTube. Ekdale then considers what this shows about the ongoing tensions between global media technology giants and local users and regulators on the continent.

## Looking beyond the digital

Social media is more than views and opinions shared online. The technology can also help orchestrate protests that move beyond the digital realm. Two studies look at this. One is by [George Karekwaivanane](#) and [Admire Mare](#) on the #ThisFlag campaign’s efforts to remove Robert Mugabe from power in Zimbabwe. The other is [Tanja Bosch](#)’s analysis of the #ZumaMustFall movement’s attempts to remove Jacob Zuma from the presidency of South Africa.

Both detail the role that social media can play alongside physical demonstrations on the streets. They each also draw attention to the numerous challenges that these movements faced. In doing so, they contribute to [Bruce Mutsvairo](#) and [Kate Wright](#)’s argument that a better understanding is needed about the preconditions of effective digital activism.

Finally, [Denis Galava](#) argues that increased social media legislation in East Africa is part of a wider historic pattern of systemic state surveillance of the region’s citizens.

These contributions highlight an important point made in this book. Any credible research into social media should be permeated by an acute awareness of how the past informs the present.

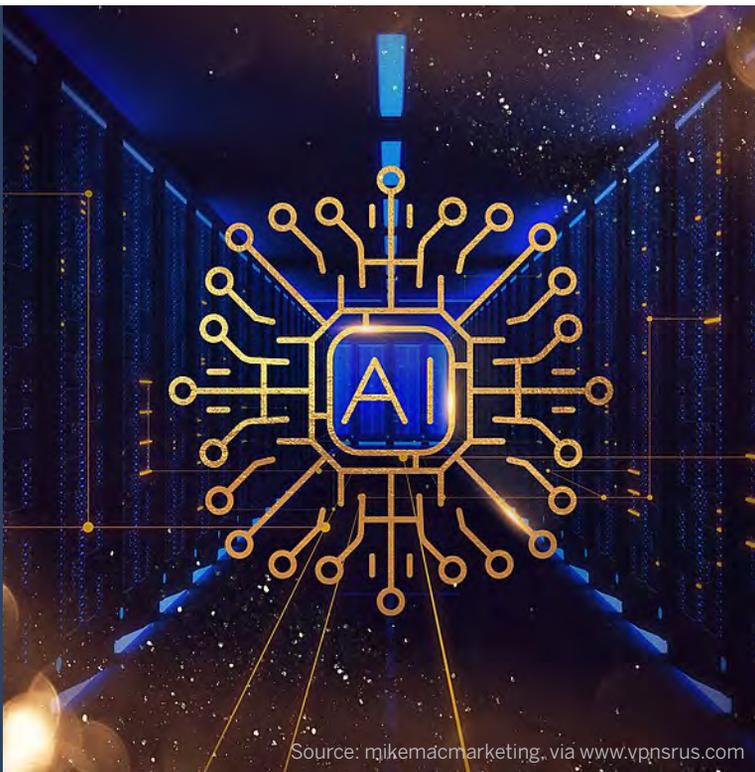
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# HOW AI IS TRANSFORMING AFRICA'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

By [Kofi Yeboah](#) | December 11, 2020



Source: [mikemacmarketing](#), via [www.vpnrus.com](#)

The recent [2020 Government AI Readiness Index](#) posits that, even though Africa is “relatively better prepared – compared to the [2019 index](#) of similar indicators – in the data infrastructure, government and technology sector pillars, there is a limited preparation of appropriate regulatory and ethical frameworks; and governments themselves generally have low use of ICTs and low responsiveness to change.”

Nevertheless, some African countries are investing in AI technologies to improve the government's efficiency. For instance, to ensure Nairobi, Kenya's capital city, is safe, the government is using [AI-powered facial recognition video surveillance technology](#) to complement policing efforts and expedite case-solving.

Over the years, the building of [Africa's internet infrastructure](#) has been led and expanded by billion-dollar tech companies in Silicon Valley. Since 2012, the major tech companies such as [IBM](#), [Google](#), and [Microsoft](#) have all established AI research centres and invested more in Africa's AI development than any African government or the African Union.

While Silicon Valley tech companies partner with local firms, technology hubs, and civil society groups to lead the AI race in Africa, many African governments align with the vision of [Chinese AI technology companies](#) because they see "open AI technologies" as a destabilizing factor to their authoritarian regime. While the continent is gradually becoming a testing bed for silicon valley tech firms to expand their data ownership, the Chinese AI tech firms are focused on [improving](#) their AI surveillance technologies in addition to diversifying their datasets.

## AI and Politics in Africa

In Africa, the impact of AI and data optimization technologies on politics has been significant in two ways – communication and the exchange of information between individuals, government and societies. Even though technology is [argued](#) to be politically neutral, its negative or positive impact on politics is dependent on who owns or has significant access to the technology. In fact, AI-powered deepfakes – *manipulated videos that can make people appear to do or say things they never did* – were [predicted](#) to be the greatest threat to the 2020 elections across Africa and likely to destabilize national politics.

The recent scandal of Cambridge Analytica's significant [role](#) in African politics, notably in [Kenyan](#) and [Nigerian](#) elections, are examples of how African politicians and economic elites have colluded with foreign AI firms to capture sensitive data of citizens. This data – *conversations, thoughts, decisions, consumption patterns, fears, concerns and emotions* – can be used to inundate citizens with targeted misinformation about political opponents. For example, one month prior to Kenya's election, Kenyans woke up to an online video titled [Raila 2020](#) which communicated that Kenya would become extremely violent, food would be scarce, there would be water shortages and so on if Raila Odinga was allowed to be president.

Even though AI technologies have been a [boon](#) to authoritarian states in Africa, the technology has also helped improve political pluralism, governmental accountability, civil liberties, and civic participation by democratizing communication platforms and strengthening transparency.

In 2016, the major opposition party in Ghana won a historic election by using a data analytics system to avoid the controversy that surrounded the previous election results and “accurately” predicted the 2016 election results before the electoral commission declared the party as the winner. The opposition party hired a Ghanaian Telecommunications Service Manager at NASA to develop an innovative system that allowed them to input data from electoral centres, via pictures of the election results sheets. The data was then transmitted simultaneously to the region and national party offices where they had set up a technology unit.

In Africa, citizens and marginalised groups use AI technologies such as [cloud computing systems](#) or [fact-check systems](#) to circumvent traditional political barriers to have a piece of the political power to influence policy discussions, ensure respect for human rights and hold governments accountable. By using these technological tools to change the political narrative, non-elites in Africa are less dependent on political elites to define the political discourse.

## AI, Transparency and Social Movements in Africa

If we were to reset the clock to the 1980s, no political leader in Africa would have anticipated that a single social media post/hashtag could trigger a dramatic change in political leadership. A few weeks ago, Nigerians, largely youth, triggered an online protest under the [#ENDSARS hashtag](#) against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigerian Police Force that is known for arresting, intimidating and killing citizens. The online movement resulted from several failed attempts by young Nigerians to have their voices heard offline. The protest garnered online support from the UN Secretary General, global political leaders and international agencies, and finally succeeded in dissolving SARS.

As echoed in an [article](#) by Nanjala Nyabola, author of *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Kenya*, “digital is changing the way we do politics and international relations, and this creates a new urgency for understanding the digital ecosystem, and specifically understanding the digital rights of citizen.”

We cannot fully understand the effect of AI on African politics from a binary perspective – good or bad. Rather, we need to understand the conditions under which AI can have a positive impact on political and social life. To ensure political statements and public debates in Africa are devoid of falsity, [African Check](#), a South African non-partisan fact checking organization is [employing](#) AI driven technologies to improve its fact checking capabilities. These AI driven fact checking tools collect and monitor information from leading news sites and social media platforms, identify and label controversial claims made by a political or any public figure, claims are matched with corresponding data to confirm or declare it false.

Amidst all these positive impacts of how AI technologies are transforming the political landscape in Africa, there is a risk of not using indigenous AI technologies to engineer the political transformation in the continent. Also, the discussion of data ownership is

very important in this context, especially when all the social media data about Africans sit on servers in North American countries. The urgent question to ask is – how do we develop frameworks to keep ownership of African data that is processed and stored in companies based in Europe, North America and China?

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*Kofi Yeboah is a frequent contributor to Global Voices Online, where he writes about internet freedom and authoritarian technology in sub-Saharan Africa. His work has appeared in The Guardian, Al Jazeera, Cosa Story, Fast Company and a number of other publications. He is a recent graduate of University of Alberta, Canada where he studies Communications and Technology.*

# DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND THE NEW PUBLIC SQUARE: REVITALISING DEMOCRACY?

By [Alina Rocha Menocal](#) | February 23, 2021



Over the past 15+ years, the world has witnessed an [astonishing transformation](#) in information and communications technologies (ICTs) across both developed and developing countries, including digitalization, mass-accessible internet, video platforms, smart phones, and social media. This has generated tremendous enthusiasm about the potential of ICTs – or as Larry Diamond has put it, “[liberation technology](#)” – to change

the way in which people hold government authorities to account. Over time, however, unbridled techno-optimism has given way to more pessimistic appraisals about the impact of ICTs on governance and how technology may in fact undermine the quality of democratic processes and help to strengthen authoritarian practices.

So how is technology changing the ways that citizens organise, mobilise and engage politically? How have ICTs altered power relations, links between state and society, and the nature of participation, contestation and representation? These are questions that I explored in a 2018 Background Paper on “[Digital technologies and the new public square: revitalising democracy?](#)” for the [Pathways for Prosperity Commission on Technology and Inclusive Development](#). The analysis below highlights key insights and findings from that research.

## The promise of digital technologies

The promise of the ICT revolution is that more information will seamlessly lead to greater opportunities for [collective action and progressive change](#). From this perspective, the proliferation and abundance of information provides individuals who have access to ICTs with an unprecedented number of options to exercise voice and influence in political processes. Thus, the argument goes, ICTs have [great potential](#) to enable collective mobilisation and to broaden political participation.

In principle, ICTs can profoundly democratise the public sphere because they make it [possible for everyone](#), not just those perceived to be elites, to contribute to and shape ongoing debates. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have upended the relationship between political authority and popular will. The function of curating content has shifted from traditional mediating mechanisms or “gatekeepers” – such as newsroom editorial boards, journalists, or political parties – towards individuals and their social networks. In theory, this flattening of information hierarchies has the potential to make the political arena more open and accessible, expose people to more diverse viewpoints and enable them to connect across time and space [at a speed and scale that was unimaginable before](#). In an age where long-established mediators, ranging from political parties and traditional media to intellectual elites and experts, have become discredited in the eyes of populations across the world, ICTs provide innovative mechanisms to engage in the political arena in ways that transcend “politics as usual”. As the examples of movements like [Black Lives Matter](#) and [Occupy](#) illustrate, social media has proven essential in helping marginalised communities and less powerful groups to come together and make their voices heard, influence important policymaking agendas at both the domestic and international levels, and place inequality and justice at the centre of debates.

A [variety of initiatives based on ICTs](#) has also sprung in different countries and regions to promote social monitoring and greater citizen engagement and participation in decision-making processes [and to foster more substantive links](#) between citizens and sources of authority and representation. These experiences cover a diverse set of issues, including municipal problem solving (e.g. Cidade Democrática in Brazil), satisfaction

with delivery of public services, complaint resolution mechanisms, and other forms of citizen monitoring (e.g. [Reclamos!](#) in Chile; [Twaweza](#) in East Africa), [participatory budgeting](#), election integrity (e.g. [Ushahidi](#)), tracking of political candidates (e.g. [Mumbai Votes](#)), and open government (e.g. the [Open Government Partnership](#))

Yet, for all the enthusiasm about the promise of digital technologies to transform the way in which citizens exercise voice, demand accountability, and act collectively to bring about change, fundamental questions remain around how ICTs are in fact redefining the public square. I turn to some of the most pressing ones below.

## Who is talking?

There are a lot of assumptions about how ICTs are helping to foster a more inclusive, participatory and representative public square, giving voice to many that have traditionally remained more marginal. But who is actually participating, and whose voices are being heard? Available evidence suggests that, while digital technologies have empowered some groups and encouraged their participation in political processes, their democratising effects have remained limited, at least to date.

Above all, social media has been particularly transformational for [young people and their political engagement](#). But ICTs are not reaching everyone equally, and there are still significant disparities in access and opportunity both *between* and *within* countries. Among other things, internet access remains [much greater in wealthy countries than across the developing world](#). Moreover, within countries, power is not equal among all citizens. This means that some people and groups have greater access or are more influential through the use of ICTs than others. Emerging evidence suggests that politically marginalised groups (for example on the basis of ethnicity) tend to have [significantly lower internet penetration rates](#) than others that enjoy greater standing, as a result of persistent political bias in the allocation of coverage. More generally, research shows that [ICTs tend to reinforce](#) the socio-cultural, economic, and gendered environments in which they are embedded, which can entrench discrimination and social exclusion rather than increase accountability to the broader public. Not surprisingly, active ICT users tend to be [urban, well-educated young men](#).

## Let a thousand flowers bloom?

Over the past several years there have been growing concerns not only that ICTs may not be as transformational as tech-optimists had originally hoped, but that they may in fact aggravate the sense of political alienation and disillusionment that has become manifest all over the world, and actively undermine the quality of democratic politics. While ICTs have the potential to connect, unite, and harness collective action for progressive change, it has become increasingly clear that they can just as easily fragment, divide, and drive more exclusionary agendas.

One challenge is that the proliferation of views can become overwhelming. The articulation of so many diverse voices can lead to a cacophony of noise rather than the articulation of coherent ideas. So, for instance, while citizens may be able to exert

pressure on government authorities more directly and immediately, in the absence of a filter, it also becomes much more difficult to digest the volume of information and understand what issues are more pressing and why – which undermines the ability of government authorities to prioritise and respond accordingly. Among other things, this can lead to the fragmentation of policy agendas and a focus on immediate, narrower and more personalised concerns at the expense of a more strategic and longer-term focus on the public good. There are also concerns that, by enabling direct linkages between voters and government officials, the mushrooming of ICTs may be [unwittingly contributing to an ongoing weakening](#) of parliaments and other formal checks and balances mechanisms.

More fundamentally perhaps, two increasingly disruptive forces — anger over social changes that many perceive as a threat, and the perception that social media is upending the ways that ideas spread and communities form — [are colliding](#). This has given rise to increasingly [polarised and rancorous](#) political climates and the creation of “filter bubbles” and/or “echo chambers” of ideologically like-minded people that make exposure to different ideas and attitude-changing information [extremely](#) difficult. These problems have been exacerbated by “[fake news](#)”. Disinformation tends to stoke long-standing tensions and conflicts and feed divisions, which can have profoundly detrimental effects on the quality of governance. This has been evident, for example, in the impact that “fake news” have had on electoral contests in democracies that are both [more](#) and [less](#) established, disseminating false narratives that create noise and exacerbate fragmentation and [even violence](#). As several studies have documented, there has also been a disturbing rise in the incidence of riots, lynchings, and other manifestations of violence in countries ranging from India, [Kenya](#), and [Mexico](#) to [Myanmar](#), the [Philippines and Thailand](#) that are instigated through hate speech, rumour, and “fake news” / (mis)information spread online.

## **(Financial) catch-22**

While every story of misinformation and manipulation is unique, different stories share common characteristics related to how social media/ICTs can unintentionally amplify certain messages and tendencies that turn out to be dangerous. Some of these are anchored on uncomfortable tensions embedded in the way that social media platforms work given their business and financial models. As Amanda [Taub](#) explains in the particular case of Facebook: “Facebook’s news feed, for instance, runs on an algorithm that promotes whatever content wins the most engagement. Studies find that negative, primal emotions — fear, anger — draw the most engagement. So, posts that provoke those emotions rise naturally.”

This does not mean that platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Google intend to spread misinformation or feed intolerance and extremism. What they are interested in is maximising advertising revenues. Thus, these platforms are caught in a catch-22: on the one hand, there may be dismay at witnessing how social media can be exploited for unsavoury purposes – but on the other, bottom lines are improved by increasing user engagement, and people tend to be drawn to content that is more divisive.

This puzzle of how social media giants can help to address social problems they have helped to exacerbate without hurting their revenues and growth is one of the leading challenges confronting reformers in this space. We are in the midst of a revolution in communications, and as such things feel extremely fluid and uncertain, with a tremendous amount of processing in real time as we try to adjust to shifting digital contexts. Yet, it is worth remembering that ICTs are not the first revolution of their kind to have challenged political systems. The printing press, the radio and television were all revolutionary in their day. All of those, disruptive as they may have seemed, were gradually regulated. How to do that now with ICTs has emerged as the new frontier, and as before, finding the right balance between different needs and priorities will be a matter of trial, error and learning.

## Feeding the Leviathan?

It is also important to highlight that ICTs don't only flourish in democracies or empower those with progressive agendas. While digital technologies may have helped to expose people in countries like China and Iran to banned news and critical opinions, social media manipulation has enabled authoritarian systems to continue to control political processes. They have done so not simply through more traditional – and blunt – methods like vote rigging, the cracking down of civic space, or the harassment of journalists, all of which are ongoing, but also through efforts to “win hearts and minds” and nurture popular support for the system through the use of ICTs. More perversely, authoritarian leaders can use new technologies to track the whereabouts and actions of reform activists both inside and outside their borders., and to censor critics. An example of this are attempts by a variety of governments in East Africa (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) to pass laws and impose taxes ostensibly to punish the spreading of “fake news” and to end “gossip” online. There is a danger that such measures are also intended to silence independent voices (e.g. bloggers) that may be critical of the political system.

## So where does this leave us?

In his 1983 classic, Benedict Anderson argues that the arrival of the printing press in the Americas in the eighteenth century played a pivotal role in the birth of nationalism. While people across vast stretches of geographical space were not able to engage in face-to-face contact, the printing press enabled them to create a sense of nation across territories as “Imagined Communities” and to project an image of themselves as a collective. The advent of the digital revolution almost three centuries later seemed to offer similar promise to shape a new public square. In practice, however, instead of imagined communities, ICTs seem to be feeding atomised and polarised ones.

Yet reality is more complicated, and it is essential to develop more nuanced and realistic understandings of how ICTs affect governance dynamics and how they can bring about change – both positive and less so.

Digital technologies are not responsible for creating social divides and fault-lines of conflict, and they cannot on their own solve the challenges of apathy, disillusionment, and distrust between people and those who rule them that have become entrenched across the world. Technologies may amplify or exacerbate certain kinds of social and human behaviour, but [they do not create such behaviour](#). Rather, ICTs are [but one of the many factors](#) that shape the dynamic relationship between citizen voice, accountability and responsiveness. The crisis of the public square that we are witnessing globally is deeply rooted in existing and underlying structures, institutions, and power relations. Getting to the core of when and how ICTs can help to make citizen engagement more effective – and for whom – means grappling with the underlying politics at play. The struggle for greater inclusion, accountability and representation is an ongoing process of negotiation and contestation; which, above all, is about altering existing power relations.

Relying on technological fixes is not enough to bring about change. The choice to engage people online or in person should not be binary or exclusionary – both mechanisms are essential and can be mutually reinforcing. As research from Kenya suggests, ICT-based solutions can widen the gap between government and citizens if offline methods to engage (around service provision, accountability, and so on) [are scaled back](#). On the other hand, when offline approaches are combined with online efforts to reach out to those who lack digital skills or access, they tend to be more successful in terms of widening participation and becoming more representative. This can be seen clearly in examples like the Black Lives Matter and other social movements mentioned above. And as [Idayat Hassan and Jamie Hitchen have noted in the case of the Gambia](#), social media working closely with offline structures and actors was key in bringing the opposition together and ousting Yahya Jammeh through elections in 2016.

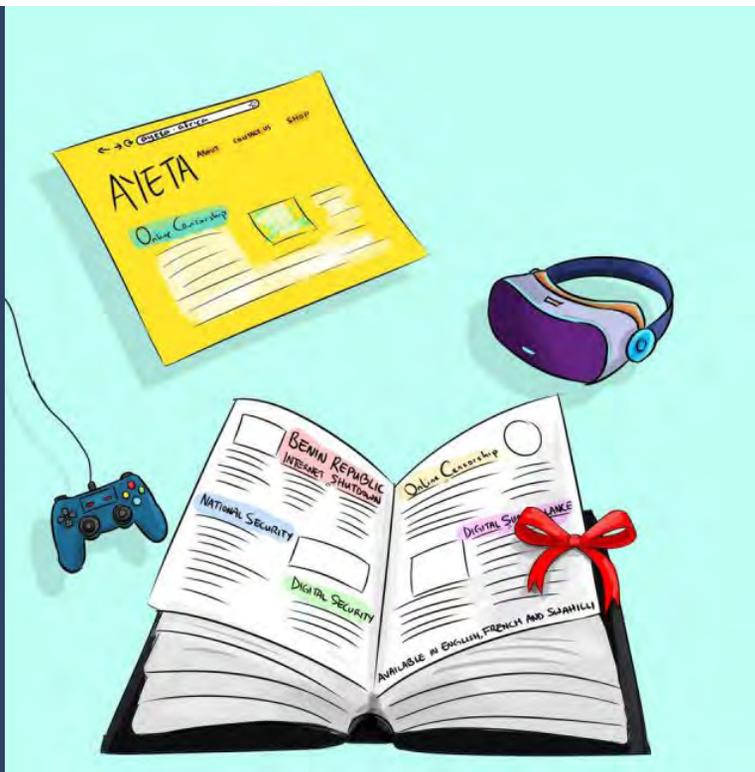
Perhaps more fundamentally, as the Gambian example also suggests, collective organization and leadership are essential in fostering sustainable change. The fate of the failed revolution in Egypt is illustrative. What made the movement that ousted Mubarak from power strong and compelling to begin with – its diffuse and transient nature and flat structure – eventually became its weakness. Protestors, mostly brought together through online networks, lacked clear leadership and representation, which made meaningful negotiation with established power holders extremely difficult. Those who started the revolution in the streets harnessing the power of ICTs were side-lined by groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and, eventually, the military once again, both of which had much clearer and much more effective organisational capacity. This is ultimately why, in [Malcolm Gladwell's memorable phrase](#), “the revolution will not be tweeted”, and the struggle for democracy, in the region and beyond, remains as traditional as ever.

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# HOW TO REVIVE AFRICA'S LOST CIVIC SPACES

By Gbenga Sesan | December 11, 2020



It was a hot afternoon at the Obafemi Awolowo University campus, a university situated in the ancient city of Ile-Ife, a little over 200km from Nigeria's commercial capital, and the location of our usual arguments at the newspaper stand in front of the Students' Union Building. Many referred to the informal gatherings as the *free readers' club*, a euphemism for our inability to actually pay for copies of the newspapers we browsed to get topics for our heated arguments. This afternoon was different because a particular magazine was missing from the stands. And then, the argument started, to determine if the military junta had seized all copies of the magazine as usual, or if it was just not delivered to campus because more people read for free than bought copies.

The military government in Nigeria clamped down heavily on the media because they provided platforms for robust debate that were not desirable to the illegal occupants of the seat of power. The clampdown on print and electronic media actually continues in many repressive African countries today, and many of the governments wish they could do to online communications channels what they do to the traditional media. The growing power of citizens expressing opinion through independent media, and the role played by activists who have now mastered using this medium to rally citizens for change, is a major concern for many governments. The attempt to move their censorship online explains the many attacks on digital rights in Africa – ranging from outright internet shutdowns to new laws that target freedom of expression online.

### **There's a Toolkit for That...**

As these threats to digital rights continue, it is important to protect civil society actors who are increasingly embracing digital spaces for their work, given the closing civic spaces in many of the countries where they work. This is why I applied to join the [Stanford Digital Civil Society Lab 2020 Non-Resident Fellowship](#) program in order to curate *Ayeta*, a toolkit that provides learning opportunities, tools and other resources to those whose work could put them in harm's way, especially in countries that increasingly look to clamp down on digital rights. As documented in Paradigm Initiative's 2019 Digital Rights in Africa report, that took a critical look at the state of digital rights in Benin, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Malawi, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, many African countries continue to use tactics such as [internet shutdowns, online censorship, and digital surveillance to clamp down on free expression in the guise of "national security"](#).

*Ayeta*, named after the the protective gear ancient Yoruba warriors wore for protection against gunshots during warfare, will provide digital security tips and measures that can be taken against potential threats. It also includes detailed information about digital security actors, a calendar of relevant digital rights events in Africa, and links to resources – such as digital security case studies from selected African countries, model policy briefs and media releases, and model coalition statements. The toolkit, which uses gamification as an opportunity to lower the learning curve, is designed with the overarching aim of addressing the growing need to safeguard digital rights defenders, journalists, whistle blowers and other civil society actors.

The process of developing the toolkit benefited from a thorough review of existing digital security toolkits and guides, in order to identify existing gaps or opportunities for the new toolkit to build on. It leaned on Paradigm Initiative's ongoing work in digital rights in addition to identified digital rights actors who work in digital security and others whose work will benefit from the availability of such a toolkit. I enjoyed the support of a dynamic Research Assistant, Bonface Witaba, in developing the toolkit that will be made available for free because Paradigm Initiative will take ownership of the project and make it sustainable through the generous support of the Netherlands Embassy in Nigeria.

## A Gift for Activists on Human Rights Day 2020

The first section of the toolkit provides background information on digital rights, including details of relevant charters, declarations and protocols, and features digital rights organizations that promote various initiatives to mitigate the vulnerabilities and risks of journalists, civil society actors and active citizens. The digital rights events identified in the toolkit provide avenues for networking and safe spaces. Case studies and model documents that could prove useful for advocacy work are also included. The second section discusses digital hygiene practices and exposes digital safety threats while offering tips and best practices on how to stay safe in online environments. The last two sections focus on the relationship between physical and digital security, and how to prepare for – and respond to – internet shutdowns.

The first version of the toolkit will be available in three languages – English, French and Swahili – and is accompanied by simple illustrations that further break down possible language barriers. The decision to build a set of games around the lessons from the toolkit comes from feedback from experts who noted complaints from those who worry about steep learning curves. With *Ayeta*, the user is able to learn while having fun, and also immediately put what they have learnt to use. The gaming experience includes quizzes, a password generator that reveals bad practices that could compromise your accounts, and a goal setting tool that combines play with real life experiences.

On this year's Human Rights Day, December 10, the first version of the toolkit will be available in form of a downloadable document. Paradigm Initiative will actively seek feedback from users on how to improve the toolkit in advance of the public presentation of *Ayeta.Africa*. This will happen on the sidelines of the Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum (DRIF) in April 2021, where we will unveil the *Ayeta* website for visitors to read and download the toolkit, and also play online games to learn more about digital hygiene and security. The toolkit will become a living tool that is easy to review and update so that as clampdown attempts get more sophisticated, additional safety tips will be made available through subsequent versions of the toolkit.

## Protection in the Line of Duty

Safety is a continuous need, especially for those who work tirelessly to promote the rights of citizens in environments where clampdowns are increasingly brazen. It is worrying, but not surprising, to see that clampdowns continue in many African countries even as we face a global pandemic, putting many civil society actors in harm's way – including through detention in overcrowded spaces that could put them at risk of infections. Many countries that have a history of clampdowns have also taken advantage of the pandemic to introduce policies and laws that will hurt the rights of citizens, and they hope to keep this up as the new normal even after the pandemic. This is another reason why African civil society actors need tools like *Ayeta* to show them how to protect themselves while tackling governments that will do anything to violate digital rights, and to showcase best practice examples that could prove useful in getting their work done.

Military dictators may no longer be in power across many African countries but just as magazines that spoke truth to power became a threat in their day, the digital space – and the many tools that it offers – continues to be a threat to African governments with clampdown agendas. Unlike magazines that could be seized and that were actually limited in circulation, social media, for example, provides a platform for debate and citizens' call for better governance. As more civil society actors adopt and use digital tools, they need to adopt digital security and safety practices that tools like *Ayeta* offer.

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# WHAT WE DO (NOT) KNOW ABOUT INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN AFRICA

By [Lisa Garbe](#) | September 29, 2020



Internet shutdowns in Africa have become the new normal. In 2019, [at least 10 African countries](#) blocked access to the internet, constituting a growing trend of digital repression, especially in [less democratic regimes](#). The term internet shutdown has been widely used to describe [different phenomena of internet manipulation](#), ranging from throttling of internet speed, over blocking of specific web content such as Facebook or Twitter, to banning internet access altogether.

These shutdowns usually occur during times of political contestation, such as violent protest or elections. In spring 2019, for instance, the [Sudanese government](#) blocked

access to mobile internet altogether amid increasing anti-government protests in Khartoum. Similarly, in [Zimbabwe](#) in January 2019, the government blocked internet access in response to increasing protest against rising fuel prices in the country. Shutdowns appear to have become the new normal and governments that refrain from using them [are applauded when they announce to stay connected](#).

This trend is accompanied by growing media and civil society attention pointing to potential consequences of internet shutdowns for the [economy](#), [authoritarianism](#), or [individual lives](#), amongst others. Yet we still know far too little about the actual societal and political impacts of internet shutdowns.

## Measuring internet shutdowns

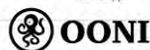
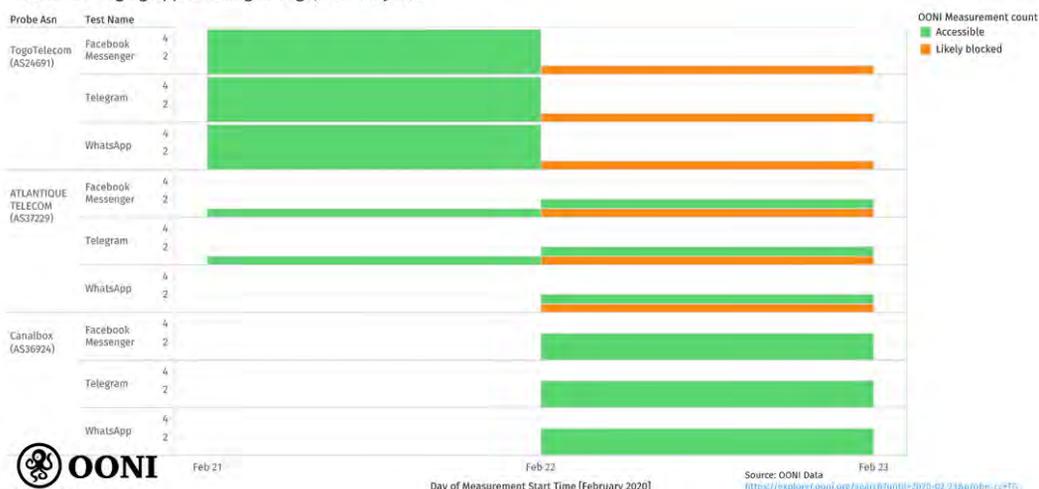
For social scientists the challenge already begins with measuring internet disruptions. Anecdotal evidence from media reports or [self-reported](#) information might suffer from [biases](#) and usually lacks more detailed information on the geographic scope, companies involved, and techniques used to block internet access. This does not only impede scholarly attempts to study internet shutdowns across countries and over time, but also blurs the involvement of different actors and eventually makes it more difficult to hold them [accountable](#).

Computer scientists have started to analyse large-scale internet traffic in order to develop unbiased measures of internet disruptions. The platform [IODA](#) provides fine-grained information about internet shutdowns including information about different [providers](#) involved as well as [timing](#). However, the available datasets are usually large, as measurements are run multiple times per day, and are thus difficult to process, aggregate, and interpret without IT expertise.

Software by the Open Observatory of Network Interference ([OONI](#)) provides data crowdsourced by individuals who run the OONI app on their smart phone. OONI data provide in-depth information about which [services](#) are blocked by which providers. This doesn't solve the problem, however, because OONI relies on self-reporting and so data is still scarce for some countries, especially in Africa.

## Social Media blocking in Togo 2020 ([OONI](#))

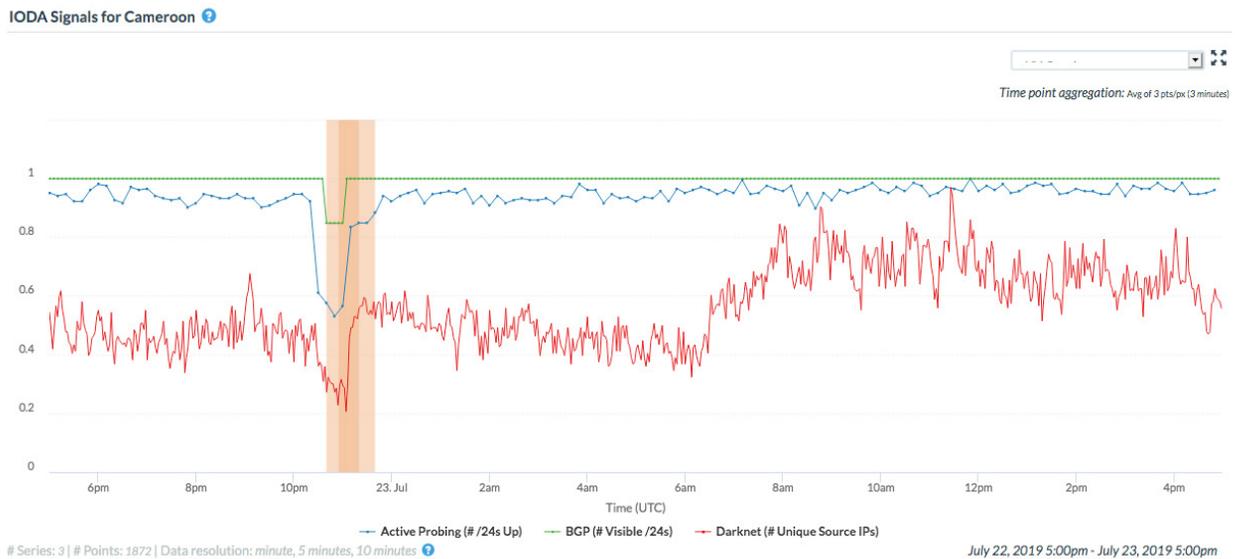
Instant Messaging App Blocking in Togo, February 2020



Day of Measurement Start Time [February 2020]

Source: OONI Data  
[https://explore.ooni.org/?asns=87&title=2020-02-23&probe\\_c=PTG](https://explore.ooni.org/?asns=87&title=2020-02-23&probe_c=PTG)

## Internet shutdown in Cameroon 2019 (IODA [1])



### When do governments stay connected?

Despite the increasing trend among many African rulers to shut down the internet, some governments refrain from blocking access. For example, only one third of all African national elections were accompanied by (partial) blocking of internet access. Several reasons might keep incumbents from blocking internet access.

First, the economic damage resulting from internet shutdowns affects an entire country's economy. Several organizations, like the [Brookings Institute](#), have sought to quantify economic damage caused by internet shutdowns. Niger's three-day long shutdown in January 2016 in response to popular protest, for example, supposedly [amounted in economic losses of more than 1.2 million USD](#).

Second, there is increasing international pressure by civil society and human rights organizations. Campaigns like [#KeepItOn](#) or [Article19](#) publicly shame governments and raise awareness for the consequences of internet shutdowns and their violations of freedom to expression.

Third, not all governments may have the capacity to easily implement a shutdown. In order to restrict access to the internet, governments rely on internet service providers (ISP) for technical implementation of the shutdown. In some African countries like Ethiopia or Eritrea the government controls 100 percent of the internet's infrastructure and runs the only state-owned provider giving them direct access to ISP operations. In other countries, like Nigeria, South Africa, or Uganda, the ISP landscape is more diverse with many providers owned by private and foreign shareholders [eventually making it more complex to implement a shutdown across ISPs](#).

## The (un)intended impact of internet shutdowns

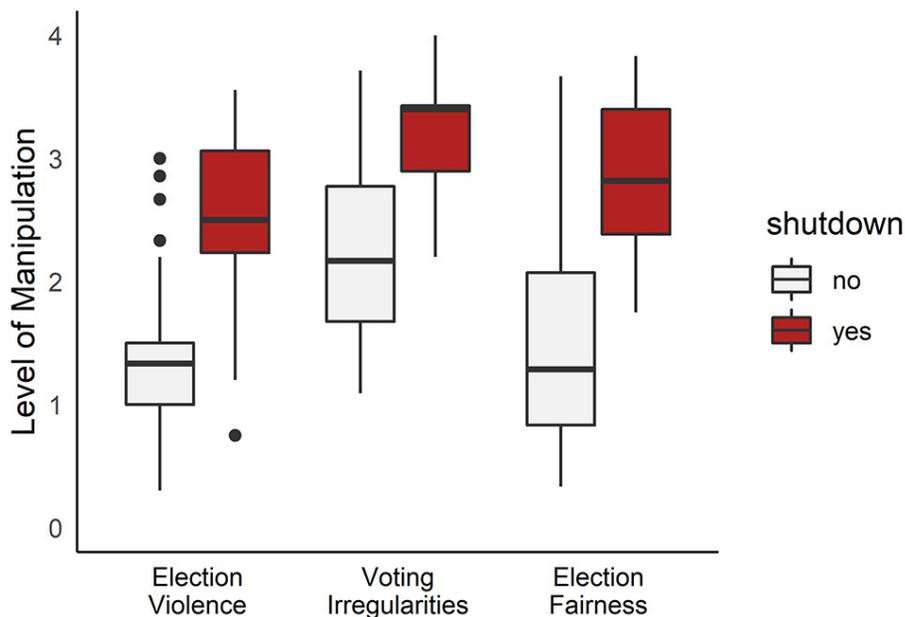
Despite limited availability of data suited for statistical analyses across regions and over time, several attempts have been made to better understand the actual consequences of internet shutdowns.

A common justification put forward by governments is that internet shutdowns are a necessary tool to [prevent violent protest](#) and preserve national security. A [study by Navid Hassanpour](#) examining protest behaviour during the 2011 shutdown in Egypt, suggests quite the opposite, however. Once the Egyptian authorities cut access to the internet, the dispersion of protests in Cairo increased. A lack of communication likely promotes local mobilization as citizens need to go outside and meet in order to physically to receive information about and political developments. [Jan Rydzak, Moses Karanja and Nicholas Opiyo's work](#) on internet shutdowns across several African countries also supports that street protests increase in immediate response to shutdowns.

[Work by Anita Gohdes](#) focusing on Syria suggests that governments even use internet shutdowns strategically to weaken the opposition. In the context of the Syrian conflict, the number of killings increased significantly in opposition strongholds affected by internet shutdowns.

These studies are useful to better understand actual impact of internet shutdowns on protest and civil conflict. It is less clear, however, what role internet shutdowns play in the context of elections. In Africa, [one third of all national elections](#) between 2015 and 2018 were accompanied by an internet shutdown. Levels of voting irregularities and electoral violence, as measured by the [Varieties of Democracy](#) project, were significantly higher during elections in which an internet shutdown occurred. However, whether and how these shutdowns actually affect the conduct of the elections remains largely unknown.

## Electoral manipulation during African elections 2015-2018



Note: Higher scores indicate higher levels of election malpractice; horizontal lines show the median. Indicators for voting irregularities (v2elirreg), election violence (v2elintim), & fairness of elections (v2elfrfair) come from [the Varieties of Democracy \(V-DEM\)](#) project. The plots are descriptive with lines indicating the median. Data about internet shutdowns comes from the #KeepItOn campaign. N = 64.

Given the increasing number of internet shutdowns in Africa, there is a need to better understand how these temporary disruptions impact political and social life. This is important not only to critically challenge justifications brought forward by governments, but also to hold responsible actors accountable.

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# WHY SILICON VALLEY NEEDS TO BE MORE RESPONSIBLE IN AFRICA

By Julie Owono | October 5, 2020



In November 2019, dazzled by the promises of fintech (finance/technology) and digital technologies for 1 billion Africans, Jack Dorsey, founder of Twitter, announced his intention to spend 6 months on the continent in 2020. The statement, which surprised many, was made during Dorsey's first African tour, which took him to

Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa. This decision was, with no doubt, influenced by a slogan that has been popular recently: [Africa is the future!](#)

Yet the reality is much more nuanced and complicated.

## **Profits without responsibility**

Yes, the future, especially the digital future, is Africa ... provided that the leaders of Silicon Valley, who flood the continent with their products, take their share of responsibility for their negative impact on fragile societies. One of the obsessions of the tech world in recent years has been to get hold of potentially 1.3 billion African consumers. For social media, it has become almost a matter of survival: the numbers show that the craze for their product is slowing in Europe and North America. Jack Dorsey is honest about taking on this ambition: Faced with criticism over his initial intention to live in Africa for part of 2020, he [told CNBC in March 2020](#): "Africa will be one of the most populated continents in the next 20 to 30 years, the tech innovation is incredible with a large portion of the population still coming onto the internet. Huge opportunity especially for young people to join Twitter".

His rival Mark Zuckerberg took longer to be honest about it, but since 2014 he has already understood that the continent is an El Dorado. The [internet.org](#) project and the [freebasics](#) spinoff app have, with ominous discretion, flooded the continent. According to Stanford University researcher [Toussaint Nothias](#), the application is now available in 30 African countries. The same Facebook is building [2Africa](#), a gigantic undersea cable, supposed to propel the digital inclusion of millions of unconnected Africans. Obviously, boosting their internet access means for Facebook to boost the number of Africans who use its services. [Google](#) too is in the race: from balloon wifi connections, to [undersea cables](#), through the opening of the first African center dedicated to research on [Artificial Intelligence](#), the digital giant is also betting on the continent.

This new scramble for Africa reminds us of times not so distant, when Western companies, supported by the colonial ambition of their country, came to harness raw materials in countries where populations lived in conditions close to slavery. These companies did not care much about the impact of their activities. A lot is different today, for example Africa is no longer colonized, at least from the international law perspective. But the foundations of an unbalanced relationship, that is barely profitable to Africa and its populations, remain: Silicon Valley projects, products and services are flooding the continent, at a time when Governments and populations there are grappling with their negative effects. Without very much attention.

Private internet companies put a lot of much needed efforts to curb the devastating effects of disinformation and hate speech on European or Northern American democracies. But the same companies will lack the same energy when it comes to addressing the same problems in places like Africa, Asia, or Latin America. This lack of energy comes with a cost: unlike in the 19th century, Silicon Valley companies could lose far more than their colonial-era Western companies, if they continue to ignore their responsibility in ensuring that their products are used in a Human Rights friendly manner.

## Profits threatened

In July 2019, Ethiopia, which Jack Dorsey visited during his 2019 African tour, was [disconnected from the internet](#) for 23 days, amidst violent clashes between different communities, which erupted after the killing of a famous singer critical of the Government. Over 239 people died, thousands have been displaced. The economic impact of the internet shutdown is also significant: the country is estimated to have lost more than 67 million dollars. No more Twitter, no more Facebook, no more Instagram, no more Bitcoin, no more emails, no more internet transactions for 23 days.

According to the Ethiopian authorities, this censorship was necessary to limit the spread of hate speech and disinformation on social networks, and “save lives”. The role of social media in the resurgence of ethnic tensions on the African continent is regularly denounced. In December 2019, as he received his [Nobel Peace Prize](#), Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed once again warned against the [negative role of social networks](#) on the peaceful relationships between communities in his country. According to an investigation by Global Voices Online, the 2019 Nigerian general election saw a “[spike of ethnic driven disinformation on social media](#)”. This was used by the Government to justify a Social Media Bill that, if passed, would allow authorities to impose internet shutdowns to fight hate speech on social media.

Ethiopia’s decision to cut access to international bandwidth is worrying, but not surprising. The country has become familiar with this method of censorship, in an attempt to safeguard national security, or to resolve content issues on social media platforms (link to Lisa’s article on shutdowns). My organization Internet Sans Frontières has been tracking the link between the increase in internet shutdowns, and the rise of hate speech and online disinformation in African countries. Our observation, which will be available in our upcoming research, is clear: the less companies in Silicon Valley diligently moderate dangerous content in countries with fragile institutions, the more states resort to censorship of access to these content platforms. This correlation represents a significant risk for the security of people, and for the democratization of the African continent.

Silicon Valley companies have no choice but to take responsibility, and ensure that their products are not used to violate Human rights. If they don’t, African consumers will not have access to their products. But nature abhors a vacuum: African users and their authorities will not fail to turn to other equivalents, [including Chinese platforms](#), that are also betting on African potential, while offering the seducing guarantee to authoritarian regimes that they can keep control over online content.

## Urgency to act

Inaction poses an economic threat to Silicon Valley. But it is also a moral hazard. No one has an interest in seeing a new Myanmar, no company wants its [name associated](#) with yet another information age genocide. Yet, if we are not careful, humanity could once again be faced with tragedy. As we speak, millions of Africans continue to access

social media, where incitement to hate circulates, with very little, if any, moderation. This normalization of hate speech online is in total violation of most local laws, and it **threatens** decades of stability and progress for peaceful coexistence on the continent. The post-covid crisis context will have more dramatic effects in Africa than elsewhere, **experts say**. A status quo in this context is the guarantee of a catastrophe, the effects of which we hardly measure in the mid and long term.

Silicon Valley companies that are willing to scale their products on new markets, including the promising African Market, must proactively think not only about the positive impact that their tools and services will have on those societies; they must first and foremost think about the threats and the impact. There are different ways to do so: one of them, which has been advocated by many prominent research and advocacy groups, including the Ranking Digital Rights project, is to request a Human Rights impact assessment prior to any launch of new services and products. These assessments must include communities that could potentially be affected.

Proactivity is a continuous process: Silicon Valley will need to rely more on the expertise of journalists, Human Rights organizations in the countries, whose acute knowledge on local affairs is unique, and worth to be included in the strategy of any company that wishes to tap into Africa's potential 1.3 billion internet users. If this doesn't happen soon, we could soon be living in a world where a significant part of humanity would be forced to live behind a new iron curtain, a world in which Facebook, Twitter and other platforms made in Silicon Valley would no longer be accessible, because of their role in inciting and facilitating violence. By that time, What will all the current investments have been useful for, then? That is the question.

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*Julie Owono is the Executive Director of Internet Without Borders, and a Member of the Facebook Oversight Board.*

# FACEBOOK'S ONGOING SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

By Toussaint Nothias | September 29, 2020



In 2016, Facebook's grand project to 'connect the unconnected' was banned in India after a year-long national debate led by digital activists. What Facebook promoted as a benevolent initiative, activists decried as self-interested attempt to increase market control of the digital space. Since then, the project kept expanding globally, particularly across Africa: by the summer of 2020, at least 32 African nations had offered the service at one point in the last five years. What made this quiet expansion possible across Africa? And what does it mean for the future of civil society, democracy and the internet on a continent increasingly connected?

## Users, data and access

As part of their efforts to increase their global reach, US tech corporations have invested in a range of connectivity projects across the Global South. One of the most notorious ones is Facebook's Free Basics initiative. Free Basics exists as both an application and website, which allows users to access some basic services, like news, weather and health information, job ads, and of course, Facebook. Free Basics does not include audio, photo and video content and is designed to work on low tech phones, which are still used in many rural areas around the world.

Significantly, users do not need to buy or use data credit to access the services. This is made possible through partnerships that Facebook established with various telecom operators in different markets. While Facebook initially presented the project as philanthropy targeting unconnected rural communities, it follows a gateway drug commercial model: this "free" sample of connectivity will spur greater data consumption, and in the process grow Facebook's user base while cementing the corporation's position as the gateway to the internet for mobile users across the Global South. Throughout 2015 from April 2015 (figure 1) shows how Facebook kept track of the project, with a list of 25 priority countries and government support, including 9 in Africa.

Figure 1 – Facebook's internal Free Basics (FBS) tracking document, April 2015

Product Partnerships - FBS Content Partnerships

**=== 25 PRIORITY FBS COUNTRIES ===**

Region	Country	Content Readiness	Government Support	Local/Social Content (%)	Notes
Africa	Nigeria			56% (24/43)	Reengage post elections; eG
	Egypt			not live	Waiting for legal
	Kenya	Launched		44% (8/18)	Awaiting partner engineering team
	Morocco			43% (10/23)	Legal review in p
	Algeria			58% (15/26)	Legal review in p
	South Africa		refresh	58% (14/24)	Upcoming May 19 launch; eGov services post launch refresh (Project Isiz
	Uganda			55% (22/40)	Legal review in p
	Angola			44% (7/16)	Upcoming May launch, policy confirm
Mozambique			50% (12/24)	Legal review in p	
SeAsia	Thailand			not live	Policy feels government involvement
	Philippines	Launched		Launched	Launched with 1 eG
	Indonesia	Launched		Launched	Launched with no eG
	Cambodia			not live	Legal review in p
	Malaysia			not live	Upon review decision was mad
South Asia	India	Launched		63% (24/38)	Exploring content
	Bangladesh			not live	Ready to launch with
	Pakistan			not live	Integration work needed; conni
	Myanmar			not live	May side to f
	Sri Lanka			not live	Building relationships with loc
	Nepal			not live	Legal review in p
LatAm	Brazil			not live	Connectivity and Et
	Mexico			not live	Signed AMX deal; meeting wi
	Colombia	Launched		53% (9/17)	Government keen on mor
	Argentina			not live	Product not sup

HIGHLY CONFIDENTIAL      FB-01366038

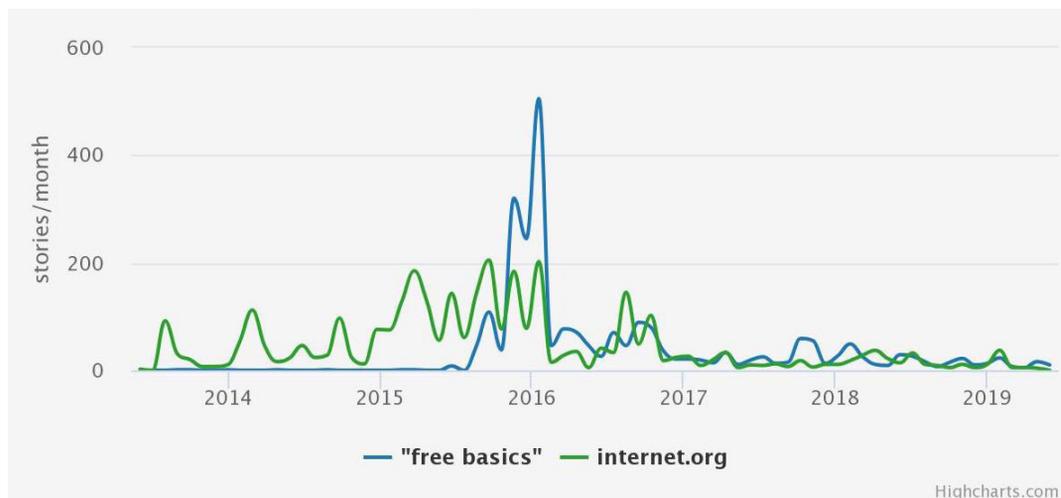
This document is part of a trove of nearly 4,000 pages of internal emails, reports, and other documents submitted as part of a lawsuit in California state court between Facebook and Six4three LLC, a former Facebook app developer. These documents were leaked to reporter Duncan Campbell and made [publicly available by NBC News](#).

As the initiative was being rolled out in India in 2015, a group of local activists forcefully opposed it (Prasad, 2018). They argued that Facebook acted as a gatekeeper of the internet by pre-selecting services available on Free Basics without transparency and with detrimental effects on smaller services and local start-ups. In a nutshell, they decried Free Basics and similar promotional offers (known as “zero-rating” offers) as violations of net neutrality, i.e., the principle that internet service providers should treat all internet traffic equally. Throughout 2015, a highly publicized national debate over net neutrality unfolded. It concluded in early 2016 with the Indian regulator banning zero-rating, including Free Basics. In sum, the widespread backlash against Free Basics contributed to raising public awareness of complex digital policy issues, and eventually led to regulatory action. In the process, it played a role in revealing the economic incentives behind Facebook’s so-called philanthropic initiative, and it testified of the growing power that digitally savvy activists can have in influencing public discourse and policy.

### Facebook’s quiet expansion in Africa

The ban was widely perceived as a massive victory for digital rights activists in India and beyond. For Facebook, it was the first major global political scandal before the fall-out of the 2016 US elections and the Cambridge Analytica scandal. To many observers, then, the pushback in India signaled the end of Free Basics. Indeed, in my research, I find that there is a peak of global news coverage in 2015 related to India, and then it dramatically decreases, as if the project had stopped (Figure 2). But this is highly misleading.

**Figure 2 – Number of news stories about “Free Basics” and “Internet.org” across 1500 Global English Language sources, June 2013 – July 2019**



Source: Media Cloud

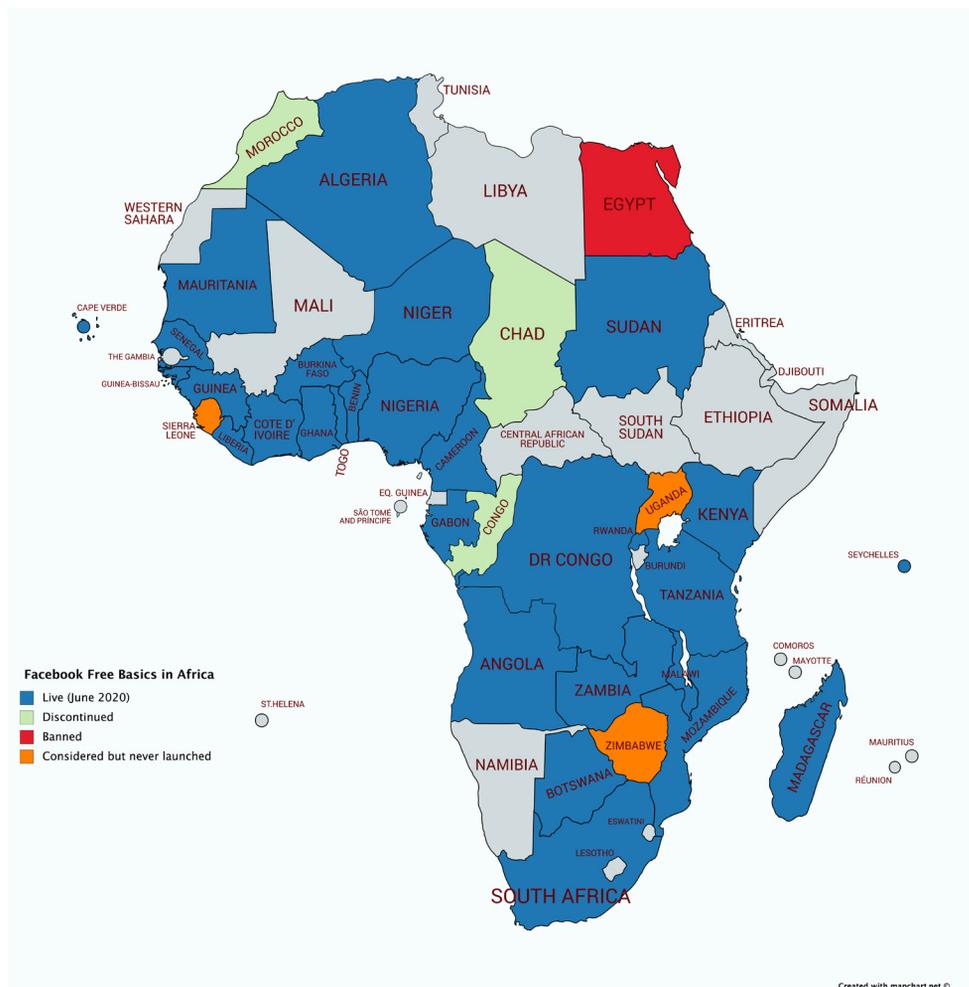
In fact, Facebook moved forward with the project around the world, particularly in Africa. In early 2016, Free Basics was reportedly available in 30 countries. By the end of 2016, Facebook reported that Free Basics – along with other Facebook connectivity projects – had contributed to bringing online 40 million people. By the end of 2018, the number was up to 100 million people. By 2019, the number of reported countries had increased to 65 countries, including 30 in Africa.

One should be cautious here because these numbers are provided by Facebook. There is a need for independent data, but this is a challenge because access to Free Basics is geographically restricted. You have to be in the country, using a sim card from a partnering telecom operator to access the service. In my research, I used a VPN service with locations in all countries on the continent. This did not allow me to access Free Basics per se; however, each country has a different landing page for 0.freebasics.com which states if the service is available, and in partnership with which telcos.

Figure 3 shows what I found.

In June 2020, Free Basics was live in 29 African nations and no longer available in 3. There were also discrepancies between what Facebook reports as the current countries and telco partners, and what I found. My [full analysis](#) discusses this in more details, as well as countries where the project was announced but not launched, and Egypt where it was banned. Overall, 32 African countries offered Free Basics at some point since 2014. Too often, generalizations about Africa are not helpful but, in this case, it's certainly quite a continental expansion.

**Figure 3 – Overview of Free Basics in Africa**



Data about availability of the service as of June 2020 obtained independently through VPN proxy.

## Explaining the apparent silence

Why didn't we see more pushback across these African nations like the one in India? And why wasn't there more of a spillover effect from the India debate to these other countries? In my paper, I argue that it's because of the combination of two key interrelated phenomena: 1) Facebook's evolving strategy in Africa, particularly its growing engagement with civil society organizations; and 2) the focus of digital rights activists across the continent on other issues including internet shutdowns, government censorship, and the lack of data privacy frameworks.

In light of the India debacle, Facebook increased its engagement with local civil society groups. In partnership with a South African NGO – the Praekelt Foundation – it launched an incubator to proactively onboard 100 social organizations onto the Free Basics platforms. This included large organizations like the World Food Programme or the UNHCR. But it also involved digitally oriented, primarily South-Africa based civil society organizations like Code for Africa, Amandla Mobi, and Africa Check – and in a way, capturing actors that may have led the charge against Free Basics.

Other aspects of Facebook's evolving strategy include:

- Ending public communication about Free Basics;
- Investing in communities of developers and software engineers (who were at the forefront of the backlash in India) – particularly in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa. In 2018, for instance, [Facebook opened NG\\_HUB](#) in Lagos, a space designed for the training, work, and socialization of creatives and developers.
- [Greater interaction and partnerships with local civil society groups and digital rights communities](#) to work on issues like misinformation, fact-checking, and online safety – and so here again, building links with communities who may have led the challenge to Free Basics.
- Investing in other connectivity and infrastructural projects less opposable on net neutrality grounds. These include the [Express WI-FI initiative](#) now available in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, Senegal and Malawi; fiber optic cables in South Africa, Uganda and Nigeria; [Internet Exchange Points \(IXP\)](#), in partnership with the non-profit organization the Internet Society; and in [May 2020, Facebook announced plans to construct "2Africa"](#), a subsea fiber optic cable surrounding the entire continent.

The second key phenomenon to consider is the broader political and regulatory landscape shaping the advocacy agenda of digital rights activism across the continent. Since the Arab spring, social media have been widely linked to a range of social protests on the continent, from the student movements #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall in South Africa to the citizen-led campaigns #EthiopiaProtests, #BringBackOurGirls in Nigeria or #ThisFlag in Zimbabwe (see [Mutsvairo, 2016](#) for an overview), and accompanied the departure of several authoritarian leaders, from Ben Ali in Tunisia

and Compaoré in Burkina Faso to al-Bashir in Sudan. Threatened by the digital activists' ability to circumvent traditional communication channels, several governments across the continent have turned to radical strategies to crackdown on digital freedoms. These include internet shutdowns, social media taxes, cybersecurity laws violating privacy and attacking free speech, and the arrest of bloggers. For digital rights activists, government-led digital surveillance and repression have constituted particularly pressing threats. As a result, their advocacy has largely focused on state actors.

## **The future of Facebook and what it means for civil society**

To summarize, my research highlights two interrelated processes behind Facebook's ability to move forward with the project across Africa. The corporation retreated from grand public relations campaigns about its supposedly philanthropic intentions and opted for a greater engagement with civil society groups and seemingly less controversial infrastructural projects. For their part, digital rights activists found themselves facing threats from state actors that felt more pressing, thereby relegating issues of zero-rating regulation to the background of their advocacy agenda.

At a time of growing calls for imagining a public interest digital ecosystem ([Zuckerman, 2020](#)), Facebook's scramble for Africa underscores new types of investments made by tech corporations, and which deserve more critical attention from scholars, journalists and activists.

On the one hand, it sheds light on the ongoing and growing investments of Facebook in network infrastructures – [a trend that other companies like Amazon and Google are also involved in – particularly in Africa](#). In addition to being monopolistic platforms in terms of content, one can envision these foreign corporate actors also becoming almost like internet service providers – a form of vertical integration with far reaching consequences for network sovereignty and (un)democratic control of digital infrastructures.

On the other hand, it reveals growing and increasingly fraught interactions between civil society and tech corporations. Traditional civil society organizations find themselves increasingly reliant on digital corporate platforms and software – from activists using WhatsApp to the World Food Programme and the UNHCR being partners to Free Basics. For their part, various digital rights activists in Africa are increasingly partnering with social media platforms to work on a range of issues – from misinformation and digital safety to election monitoring and fact-checking. All the while, they often rely on philanthropic funding frequently linked to tech industry fortunes built on the global extraction of data. How this funding will affect the positioning of African digital rights community vis-à-vis US tech corporations down the line, particularly regarding matters of national digital regulatory frameworks and policies, remains to be seen.

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*This blog post is based on the following article: Nothias, T. (2020) "Access Granted: Facebook's Free Basics in Africa." *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(3): 329-348. The full paper is available [open access here](#), and is part of a [special issue on "Social Media and Democracy in Africa"](#) edited by Bruce Mutsvairo and Helge Rønning. An [earlier version](#) of this blog post appeared on the [Network Sovereignty Blog](#) edited by Lisa Parks and Ramesh Srinivasan.*

# THE ROLE OF THE COURTS IN SAFEGUARDING ONLINE FREEDOMS IN AFRICA

By [Michael Asiedu](#) | December 11, 2020

## DECODING DIGITAL DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA



The growing importance of the internet in Africa has been accompanied by attempts of authoritarian governments to control the digital flow of information and communication through internet shutdowns, censorship, and surveillance. The [increase in internet shutdowns](#) in recent years in Africa demonstrates the worrying trend of governments' attempts to restrict freedom of expression in the digital realm.

Purported reasons for internet shutdowns range from the protection of national security to the prevention of fake news or misinformation. However, the real motives often lie elsewhere, in the desire of governments to suppress opposition parties, protests, and voters. Even where national security is an issue, the shutdowns that we see are rarely, if ever, [proportional](#).

At the heart of the debate over these shutdowns lies the right to freedom of expression online. Many African governments officially protect this right, for example through constitutional provisions or legislation governing access to information. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) also has a [resolution](#) which affirms the rights of all Africans to freedom of expression online. In addition, the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms and the African Platform on Access to Information (APAI) [declaration](#) both seek to protect individuals against internet shutdowns. At a global level, the UN has also provided [legal instruments](#) to protect the right to freedom of expression.

Despite this, internet shutdowns continue – even in countries that subscribe to these laws and guidelines.

So how can human rights activists hold governments that are violating these rights to account? Two court cases concerning Zimbabwe and Togo demonstrate the huge role that courts could play both on the national and regional level in determining whether or not internet shutdowns become a permanent feature of African political life.

## **Zimbabwe's 2019 Internet Shutdown**

The [internet shutdown](#) in Zimbabwe came against the backdrop of a week of deadly protests caused by a spike in gasoline prices in the country in early 2019. To quell the protests, [Econet Wireless Zimbabwe](#), the country's biggest mobile phone and internet service provider (ISP) alongside others complied with a government-ordered internet shutdown. This internet shutdown [directive](#) was issued by the Minister of State for the President's Office for National Security through the Director General of the President's Department citing Zimbabwe's Interpretation of Communication Act. Internet platforms such as email services and prominent social media platforms including WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter were all down.

Following this directive, lawyers representing three individual journalists and the Zimbabwe Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA Zimbabwe) requested outright revocation of the directive. The government and its related authorities failed to heed to this request. As a result, the case was challenged in Zimbabwe's High court (a national court) and heard by Justice Tagu in a matter of days.

The [Applicants](#), Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) and Media Institute of Southern Africa-Zimbabwe Chapter, challenged the internet shutdown directive on three fronts. First, there was no legal basis to issue a directive based on the [Interception and Communications Act Chapter 11](#). Second, the directive had caused violation of

fundamental freedoms and the rights of the applicants and members of the public in general and third, the directive had brought serious inconveniences, loss of businesses and income, threats to life, and right to health care among others.

Lawyers for the respondents – the Minister of State for National Security and others including Director-General of Intelligence Services, The President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Econet Wireless Zimbabwe Limited and so on – refuted these arguments. In the end, Justice Tagu upheld the applicants' argument that the Minister of State was not legally responsible for the administration of the Act. Accordingly, “the Minister” was not in the legal position to exercise such powers per Section 6 of the Act, which states that only the President can issue a “warrant” or a “directive” re: the administration of the act. The ruling was upheld upon the failure of the respondents to file an appeal and internet services were subsequently [restored](#).

This represented a remarkable victory for the rule of law in a country where this has increasingly come under threat, but it is worth noting that oral arguments on the expansive legal issues raised by applicants were not part of the ruling. Stakeholders who had wanted this case to serve as a foundational precedent in the fight against internet shutdowns were thus left unsatisfied, as ultimately it was determined on the basis of procedural mistakes and not the issue of whether the internet shutdown infringed on the rights of citizens such as freedom of expression.

## **Togo's 2017 Internet Shutdown**

In [2017](#) the Togolese government ordered an internet shutdown to quell anti-government protests. Civil society actors and lawyers, skeptical of the independence of Togolese courts, took the Case to the Ecowas Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court. The Court ruled that the shutdown was [illegal](#) and violated [freedom of expression](#) – but this decision only came in mid-2020, almost three years after the shutdown was implemented.

The Court ordered the government of Togo to pay 2 million CAF to the plaintiffs as compensation and to implement measures to safeguard the freedom of expression of the Togolese people. It also stated that [digital rights were human rights too](#) – both offline and online. Thus, unlike the Zimbabwean Case, the ECOWAS Court dealt with the substantive consequences of the shutdown, making it a first precedent by a regional court for the sub-region and beyond.

At the same time, the time that the Court took to make the decision, and the fact that Togolese activists could not seek redress domestically, demonstrate the limitations of seeking judicial protection against political abuses.

## **Looking Ahead**

The lack of entrenched judicial independence, fear of incumbent governments and witness intimidation in many African states makes litigation of internet shutdown and

digital censorship cases difficult. These two cases, however, offer both hope and valuable lessons in the fight against internet shutdowns going forward.

In particular, they demonstrate that legal recourse could be resorted to when internet shutdowns occur and in cases where national courts are unwilling or are compromised by allies of the incumbent, regional courts could step in as demonstrated by ECOWAS court's ruling. The ruling by the Zimbabwean High Court also exemplifies the key role local or national courts can potentially play in protecting the right to freedom of expression online.

In any case, the onus lies on citizens, civil society actors, lawyers, and internet rights and freedom activists to be constantly vigilant in challenging internet shutdown cases in the local and regional courts.

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# FAKE NEWS IN AFRICA – HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM?

By [Herman Wasserman](#) | February 23, 2021



Source: [mikemacmarketing](#), via [www.vpnusrus.com](#)

*How dangerous is fake news in Africa? And how much of it is there? Do people know when they are circulating fake news? And if so why do they do it? In a fascinating new study, Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales set out to answer these questions, and many more ...*

Concerns about “fake news” have dominated discussions about the relationship between the media and politics in the developed world in recent years. The [extraordinary amount](#) of attention paid in scholarship and in public debates to questions around truth, veracity and deception can be connected to the [role of “fake news”](#) in the 2016 US presidential election, and US President Donald Trump’s use of the term to dismiss his critics.

The term “fake news” itself is [controversial](#) because [it's poorly defined](#).

The panic created by the spread of misinformation in general has led to introspection by journalists and a reassertion of professional values and standards.

The rise of [false information](#) has complex cultural and social reasons. Until now, though, the phenomenon has been studied mostly as it happens in the US and Europe, with relatively [little attention](#) to the situation in African countries.

This is despite the fact that disinformation on the continent has often taken the form of [extreme speech](#) inciting violence or has spread racist, misogynous, xenophobic messages, often on mobile phone platforms such as [WhatsApp](#).

To fill the gap in information about “fake news” in sub-Saharan Africa, we conducted an online survey in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa earlier this year. [Our study](#) had three goals: to measure the prevalence of disinformation, to learn who people believe is responsible for stopping fake news, and to understand the relationship between disinformation and media trust.

Our survey, in which 755 people took part, reused questions from [another study](#) on the topic conducted in 2016 by the US-based Pew Research Centre. In this way we are able to compare our results with those in the US.

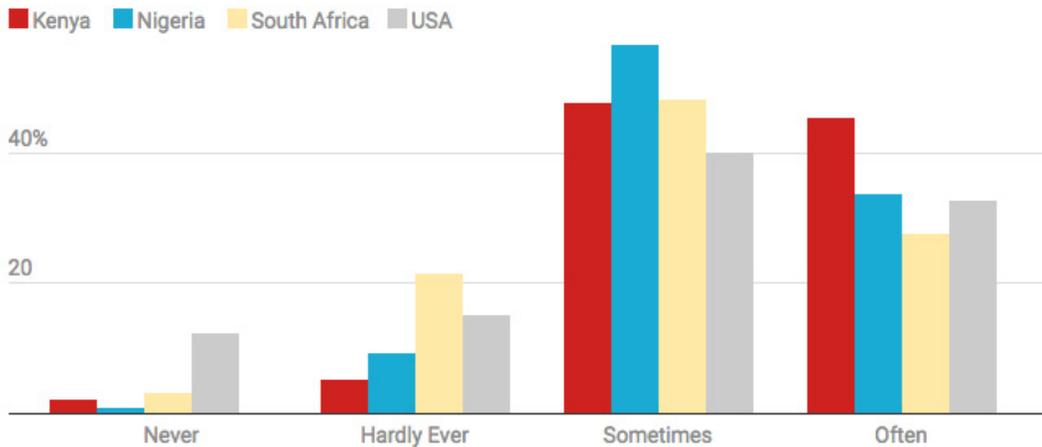
Our findings suggest that African audiences have low levels of trust in the media, experience a high degree of exposure to misinformation, and contribute – often knowingly – to its spread.

## Findings

There are five takeaways from our study. First, media consumers in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa perceive that they are exposed to “fake news” about politics on a fairly regular basis. Almost half of Kenyan respondents said they often encounter news stories about politics that they think are completely made up. More alarmingly, only a small fraction (ranging from 1 to 3%) say they have never come across fabricated news. In the US, that figure is much higher (12%).

## Frequency of Perceived Exposure to Disinformation about Politics

How often do you come across news stories about politics and government online that you think are completely made up?



Source: Wasserman & Madrid-Morales 2018; Pew Research Centre 2016 • [Get the data](#) • Created with Datawrapper

Second, surveyed Africans said they shared “fake news” with a much higher frequency than Americans do: 38% Kenyans, 28% Nigerians and 35% South Africans acknowledged having shared stories which turned out to be made up. In the US only 16% did so. When asked whether they had shared stories that they knew were made up, one-in-five South Africans and one-in-four Kenyans and Nigerians said “yes”.

### Sharing 'Fake News' about Politics

% of respondents who answered 'Yes' to the question: have you ever shared a political news story online that...?



Source: Wasserman & Madrid-Morales 2018; Pew Research Centre 2016 • [Get the data](#) • Created with Datawrapper

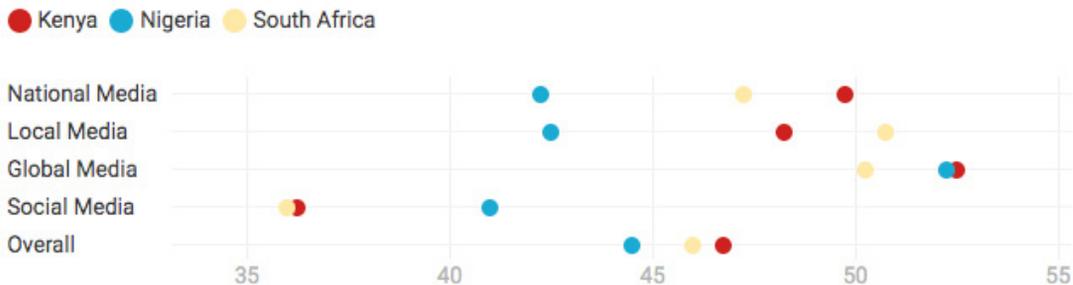
Third, the public is seen as bearing the largest responsibility in stopping the spread of misinformation. More than two-thirds of respondents in all three countries said members of the public have a lot or a great deal of responsibility. Next came social media companies and, in last place, the government.

Fourth, we found that Nigeria has the lowest level of overall trust in the media of the three countries. On a scale from 0 to 100, average values were consistently below 50. Declining levels of media trust are not exclusive to sub-Saharan Africa, but are [a trend across the globe](#).

By type of news organisation, Nigerian and Kenyan audiences said they trust international media more than any other. In South Africa, local media are the most trusted. A consistent pattern across countries is the lowest degree of trust in social media.

## Trust in the News Media

How much, if at all, do you trust the information you get from...?



Values can range from 0 (no trust in the media at all) to 100 (a lot of trust in the media).

Source: Wasserman & Madrid-Morales 2018 • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Fifth, we found that those respondents who believe they are exposed to “fake news” more regularly, have lower levels of trust in the media. Because misinformation and disinformation appear to be contributing to the erosion of media trust, it is important that strategies to address the fake news phenomenon look beyond media literacy.

## Rebuilding trust in media

Educating audiences about the dangers of fake news is not enough. Media literacy should form part of a larger, multi-pronged approach to restore trust in the media. The findings suggest that media organisations would have to work hard at rebuilding relationships with audiences.

Our data comes with some limitations. While we tried to sample different segments of society, because data was collected online, it is more likely to represent the point of view of urban middle classes, than those living in rural areas or with lower income levels – or both.

The results of this study, which is the first to explore misinformation and disinformation in multiple African countries, provide some initial evidence that can be used in designing strategies to limit the spread of fake news, and to mitigate the declining trust in the media.

In sub-Saharan Africa, mainstream media have long struggled to gain their independence and freedom. State control, either through ownership or suppression, over media remains strong. The high levels of perceived exposure to misinformation and disinformation, if left unaddressed, could further undermine the precarious foothold of independent media on the continent.

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The 'disinfodemic' has resulted in misinformed behaviours such as [drinking alcohol](#) and [applying heat](#) to kill the virus. Some people were led to believe that the virus [only affects white people](#), that testing kits [are contaminated](#), and that vaccines are being [tested on Africans](#) while the truth is that a vaccine has not yet been discovered in Africa.

Other fake news purveyors purported that [shaving makes face masks more effective](#), [made up riots](#), and made [fake claims with falsified video evidence](#) about Nigerians burning Chinese-owned shops in response to cases of harassment of Africans in China.

These instances are just the tip of the iceberg and governments have had to adopt and implement strict measures to combat the 'disinfodemic'. Many have been able to contain fake news by warning or arresting those spreading it.

For example, in [Mauritius](#), a man who falsely claimed that riots had erupted after the prime minister announced the closure of supermarkets and shops, was arrested under the Information and Communication Technology Act.

In [South Africa](#), authorities arrested people spreading the news that the virus was being spread by foreigners. And in [Kenya](#), a 23-year-old man was arrested after he published false information with the intent to cause panic.

But these strict controls are also affecting the freedom of expression of people on the continent.

## **Fake news versus freedom of expression**

Even before COVID-19, many African countries used libel and defamation laws, and [internet shut downs](#) to limit the freedom of expression of citizens and the media. Some examples are Cameroon, Ethiopia, Chad, Egypt and Uganda.

With the advent of the new coronavirus, the pandemic is now being used as an excuse to further limit freedom of expression. In [Tunisia](#) for example, two bloggers who criticised their government's response to COVID-19 were arrested.

In [Mauritius](#), a woman who published a sarcastic meme against the government was arrested for spreading fake news. And in countries such as Ethiopia, Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya, Somalia and Zimbabwe, there are [increasing cases of arrests and attacks](#) by law enforcement and security agencies on journalists covering the pandemic.

These incidents act as a limitation to the freedom of expression of Africans, including that of the press. In this regard, on World Press Day – 3 May – the [UN Secretary General](#) emphasised the role of the press as an 'antidote' to the 'disinfodemic'.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, international organisations such as the [World Health Organisation](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) have adopted guidelines and checklists regarding the protection of human rights. This includes the freedom of expression as COVID-19 measures are implemented.

There are also many laws at the global and regional level that require countries to uphold freedom of expression even in times of pandemics. That freedom can only be limited with justification for instance where news is proven to be fake.

## Protection

Many of the arrests and attacks that are being made by government officials in different African countries are contrary to international conventions.

[Article 19](#) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects the universal freedom of expression but provides for limitations. Measures to contain fake news during COVID-19 are permissible under the protections of public health. However, these limitations do not apply when citizens critique the measures their governments have taken as long as they [do not spread fake news](#).

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression [published a report](#) last month on disease pandemics and freedom of opinion and expression. The Special Rapporteur emphasised that freedom of expression is critical to meeting the challenges of the pandemic.

The report recommended that states must still apply the test of legality, necessity and proportionality before limiting freedom of expression even in cases of public health threats. This recommendation can still be used to combat fake news as long as the impact on freedom of expression is minimal.

At the continental level, freedom of expression is protected by [Article 9](#) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa issued a recently [press statement](#) expressing concerns about internet shutdowns in African countries in the time of COVID-19.

The statement recommended that states guarantee respect and protection of the right to freedom of expression and access to information. This would be through access to the internet and social media services. The Special Rapporteur emphasised that states must not use COVID-19 as “an opportunity to establish overarching interventions”.

And the [African Commission recently published](#) its Revised Declaration on Principles of Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa. According to the Declaration, freedom of expression is an indispensable component of democracy. It states that no one should be found liable for true statements, expressions of opinion, or statements which are reasonable to make in the circumstances.

The African Charter and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are binding on all African states except [Morocco](#) and [South Sudan](#) respectively.

Thus, African nations must ensure that they protect freedom of expression even in times of a pandemic. This must be the case unless governments are genuinely containing fake news.

African states should adopt regulations that clearly define what constitute fake news in relation to COVID-19. They must allow the citizens and the media to express themselves. The measures being taken in response to COVID-19 must be debated without fear of frivolous charges.

Finally, African governments must not use fake news during this pandemic as a shield to violate the freedom of expression of its citizens, or settle old scores with the press.

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# HOW DIGITAL REPRESSION IS CHANGING AFRICAN POLITICS

13

By [Steven Feldstein](#) | February 23, 2021



Africa's first election of 2021, featuring a presidential race in Uganda between President Yoweri Museveni and opposition leader Bobi Wine, provided a textbook example about how governments have perfected their exploitation of digital tools to manipulate elections and reinforce political control. In the weeks leading up to the election, pro-Museveni government actors used fake accounts on Facebook and Twitter to launch an [online influence operation](#), which the social media giants subsequently removed.

The government retaliated by first [banning access to social media platforms](#), and then instituting a total internet blackout lasting for five days (and [costing nearly \\$9 million](#) in lost economic activity). As a result, the [Open Observatory of Network Interference](#) concluded that “Uganda not only experienced social media blocking (regardless of [OTT tax](#) payment), but also a [4-day internet outage](#)” as part of an election that was “marred by violence, as authorities [reportedly](#) cracked down on opposition rallies, while opposition candidates and their supporters experienced threats and intimidation”. <https://ooni.org/post/2021-uganda-general-election-blocks-and-outage/>

Despite widespread fraud allegations and international condemnation about the ruling party’s nasty tactics, the country’s electoral commission declared Museveni the winner with 59 percent of the vote. Uganda’s behavior is hardly unique on the continent. In the past decade, governments have increasingly turned to digital tools to reinforce their political repression strategies.

Digital repression is best understood as the use of information and communications technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups in order to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state. I identify [five tools or techniques](#) that are central to digital repression efforts: surveillance, censorship, disinformation, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecution of online users.

Governments deploy different combinations of these tools based on a number of factors: the nature of the political threat they face (e.g., mass protests vs. political challenges from particular individuals), how government intelligence or security forces are structured, overall technological capacity, whether the government has prior experience using certain digital techniques, and prevailing political norms (e.g., practices which are tolerated in authoritarian systems like Saudi Arabia are less acceptable in hybrid democracies like Kenya).

While Africa lags the world in terms of internet connectivity—[less than a third of its population](#) enjoys regular internet access – and while its governments display [critical cyber deficiencies](#) related to infrastructure and qualified personnel, this has not diminished digital repression patterns on the continent. Three trends are especially worth highlighting: the expanding use of internet shutdowns, the rise of disinformation, and domestic sources of digital repression.

## **Expanding Use of Internet Shutdowns**

Governments across Africa are implementing internet shutdowns with increasing frequency for political gain. [In recent years](#), governments in Togo, Guinea, Uganda, Tanzania, and Burundi have restricted internet access during elections to manipulate result. Leaders in Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali, and Zimbabwe have blocked online connectivity to stem mass protests. In Ethiopia, President Abiy cut connectivity in the northern Tigray region in conjunction with major military operations. Consequently, internet shutdowns have become increasingly common on the continent. [Access Now](#), for example, found that occurrences of internet shutdowns in Africa increased by 47% from 2018 to 2019.

In some instances, governments impose wholesale internet blackouts. In other cases, authorities block specific websites or platforms. No matter the method, the intent is to deprive citizens access to crucial information communicated online during a time of unrest. Throttling the internet stifles dissent from political critics, hinders organizational efforts from opposition groups, and shields government abuses from domestic and international scrutiny. As I have written, internet shutdowns are [inferior instruments of repression](#) for several reasons.

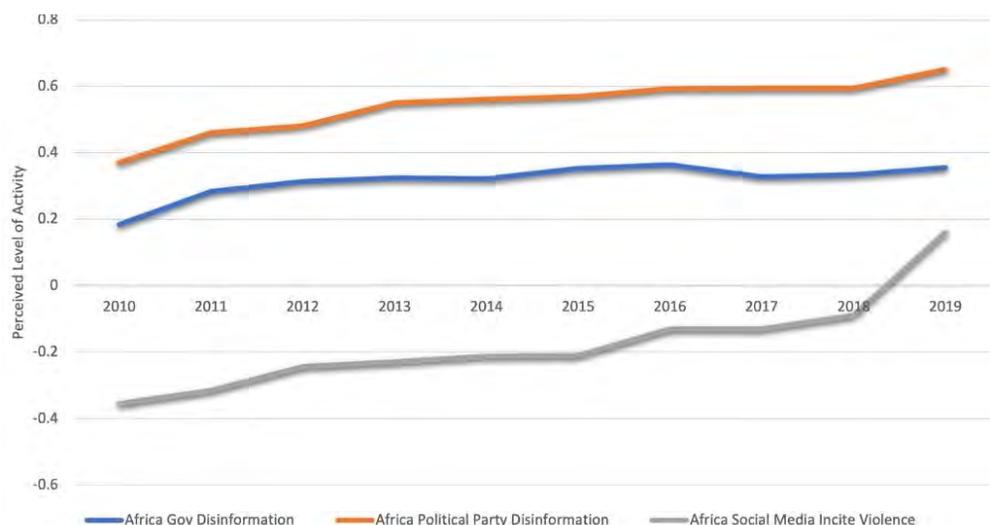
First, they are expensive. They not only stifle commerce during the actual implementation period, but research shows that their [negative economic effect](#) can linger long after a shutdown concludes. Such economic loss may translate to diminished political support over time. Second, as much as internet shutdowns inhibit protestors and opposition members from communicating with one another, they also prevent government authorities from monitoring events in the country – which groups are mobilizing or demonstrations that are being planned. Such willful blindness can be a serious obstacle to effective intelligence gathering by the state. Nonetheless, internet shutdowns are also easy to enact, the political blowback is limited, and they bring immediate short-term results. Their use by governments in Africa will likely continue to grow.

## Disinformation Takes Hold

As more African citizens come online and as the state monopoly on information dissipates, governments are adapting new techniques to spread false information and influence political discourse. State actors are using online disinformation campaigns and manipulation techniques, leading to electoral rigging, political and social polarization, and incitement to violence.

Data collected by the [Digital Society Project](#) illustrates the increasingly large role of disinformation in African politics. The prevalence of government and political party disinformation in Africa rose significantly from 2010-19. Violence incited by social media also increased. As Figure 1 shows, for most of the 10-year period, social media-induced violence lagged the global mean, but in 2019, its prevalence increased sharply.

**Figure 1 – Disinformation and Social Media Incitement to Violence Trends in Africa (2010-19)**



**Note:** 0 = global mean for all country years. Figures below 0 represent below average variable measurements; figures above 0 indicate higher than average measurements. The data measures experts' survey responses to perceptions of how prevalent each variable is in a given country for that particular year but does not represent quantitative tallies of specific incidents.

Source: Valeriya Mechkova, Daniel Pemstein, Brigitte Seim, Steven Wilson, "Digital Society Project Dataset v2", 2020.

Countries with pre-existing high levels of political repression, such as Eritrea, South Sudan, Burundi, Zimbabwe, and Somalia, also saw high levels of [government disseminated](#) false information. Many of these same countries also displayed high levels of offline violence organized on social media, likely related to the quantity of false information propagated by their governments.

Using online disinformation as a politically repressive tool is a new variable that is rapidly changing and not yet fully understood. Moreover, [disinformation is not limited to government actors](#) – increasingly political parties, civil society groups, and other stakeholders are exploiting these techniques for political gain. Disinformation campaigns are likely to bring significant political consequences and unintended societal ramifications in Africa in the coming years, not unlike the political convulsions consolidated democracies like the United States are currently experiencing.

#### Domestic Sources of Digital Repression

A common refrain is that China is responsible for the [growing prevalence of digital repression](#) strategies in Africa (and worldwide). While China has played an important enabling role in subsidizing hi-tech equipment to repressive regimes, this critique overstates a more complex picture. By and large, digital repression in Africa is a function of domestic factors rather than foreign influence. A useful counterfactual is to consider whether authoritarian leaders in countries such as Uganda or Zimbabwe would have found other ways to digitally repress their citizens even if they lacked access to Chinese technology – and that provided by foreign actors more generally. Given the growing availability of repressive technology (and African leaders' corresponding commitment to use these tools), it seems clear that preexisting political repression is a much stronger predictor of digital repression than China's export policy.

It is worth noting that liberal democracies have also played a [significant role](#) in providing intrusive digital tools to authoritarian African governments. In part, this is an outgrowth of the post-9/11 reorientation of Western foreign policy priorities toward counterterrorism and securitization. As scholars like Iginio Gagliardone have written, US counterterrorism initiatives generated "[policies leading to greater surveillance and censorship](#)" by supplying partner governments with powerful technologies to catch insurgents while turning a blind eye to their domestic repression agendas.

## The future of digital repression

Digital repression in Africa will continue to evolve. As online connectivity increases and as mass protest movements continue to rely on [social media and communications apps](#) to challenge regimes, governments will seek new ways to block challengers and suppress dissent. It is unlikely that either side will gain a decisive advantage. Rather, the landscape will resemble a game of cat-and-mouse, with governments and protest movements striving in turn to adapt new capabilities in order to gain leverage over their counterparts. Some regimes may explore deploying more expensive and bespoke approaches like AI-enabled surveillance and censorship filtering. However, most governments will continue relying upon tried-and-true digital strategies – internet

shutdowns, targeted spyware attacks against political opponents, arresting online activists, and spreading disinformation – as core tools for their political survival.

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*Steven Feldstein is a senior fellow in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's democracy, conflict, and governance program. From 2014 to 2017, he served as the U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor. His new book, [The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance](#) (Oxford University Press) comes out April 13.*

# HOW TO ENSURE DIGITAL ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN AFRICA

By Lisa-Marie Selvik | September 29, 2020



The right to access information and by extension the right to internet and internet-based information is today recognised as key for open and democratic societies. The technical possibilities to provide this access digitally vary greatly across the world and especially the gap between rich and poor countries have raised concerns over a [global 'digital divide'](#). Even though [digitization ranks low on the priority lists](#) of many developing countries, the increasing tech savviness in many African countries has the [potential to reduce this gap](#). Good digital practices for improving citizens' access to information can further [reduce other inequalities](#), like income and education.

Digital access should not be seen as a separate goal, however, but rather as a means to enhance and support 'analogue' practices. In order to reap the fruits of the growing technical know-how for ensuring access to information, it is necessary to combine the legal arguments for *why* with the technical solutions for *how*.

## The analogue right to access information

One such analogue practice is to institutionalise the right to access information. While advocates for the freedom of information in Western democracies are largely concerned with the [free flow of digital information and unrestricted online communication and file-sharing](#), efforts to promote freedom of information in most African countries are fundamentally focused on [championing citizen's right to access government-held information](#) – with [limited success](#) so-far. Even though more and more African countries are adopting so-called [Freedom of Information \(FOI\) laws](#), too many of them [remain unimplemented and ineffective](#). Indeed, it will require [much more than adopting](#) these FOI laws to improve access to government data, increase transparency and expand the frontiers of democracy. How to implement these laws is key.

Technical solutions have great potential for open government platforms, [proactive information sharing](#) on government websites, and [civil society monitoring](#). Digital democracy – also referred to as [e-democracy or internet democracy](#) – is a growing concept worldwide that essentially refers to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in political and governance processes. Importantly, ICTs are seen as [an addition to and not a replacement for](#) traditional 'analogue' political practices. There is a wide consensus that the internet can contribute to improving political participation. The use of internet and ICTs contains immense potential for the notion of digital democracy, both with the growing possibilities of [e-government and e-participation](#) but also the aspect of [increasing information flows and transparency in government](#).

## Digital access and right to the internet

[Digital access](#), that is access to internet and communication devices, is naturally a fundamental prerequisite for citizens' use of ICTs in political participation. The right to internet access is embedded within the notion of both digital access and access to information, as Fola Adeleke and Matilda Lasseko Phooko (2010) argue in their chapter '[Towards realizing the right of access to internet-based information in Africa](#)'. Key to their argument is the point that while 'access to information' is a socio-economic resource, the internet is increasingly the way to actually access information.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the World Bank estimates that [only 25.4% of people on average](#) used the internet in 2018. This greatly differs across the continent, from 56.2% in South Africa to 1.3% in Eritrea. Further, estimates on internet use in Africa often suffer from [large margins of error](#), as they are based on poor measures and thus do not always reflect the reality on the ground.

Ultimately, the [increased spread and usage of ICTs in Africa](#) has the potential to enhance citizens' access to information. In order for digital technologies to benefit everyone everywhere, and especially harnessing the benefits of internet access for digital democracy and political participation, [the remaining digital divide must be closed](#). If governments and citizens both take advantage of the digital revolution, ICTs can improve the access to and use of information. However, the potential for transparency and open government practices depends on [how it is being leveraged](#).

[Digital democracy was on the rise in Africa](#), but is now being challenged by misrepresentation, high prices – Malawi is said to have the most expensive internet in the world – and repression. This has been termed '[digital dictatorship](#)', or what Freedom House has labelled '[the rise of digital authoritarianism](#)'. In her book *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*, Nyabola (2018) examines digital democracy in Kenya and explores how political elites try to prevent social movements from translating their online political participation into meaningful offline political gains. This study shows that citizens and politicians alike have found new ways for their messages to travel far and fast. However, as elsewhere in the world, African societies and politics are facing speculations and disinformation, fake news and propaganda disseminated online, affecting the public debate. Especially internet shutdowns have become a new normal in Africa.

## **Combining the right to access to information with digital solutions**

Leaving behind the question of digital access in Africa, let us turn to the question of how to improve citizens' access to government data with the aim of increasing transparency and expanding the frontiers of democracy. Two prominent civil society campaigns have become the global mouthpiece of advocacy towards a more open and transparent governance. The first is the [Freedom of Information \(FOI\) campaign](#), which is largely regarded as a global social movement. In Africa, this campaign is spearheaded by the [Africa Freedom of Information Centre](#). More recently, a similar movement in the form of [open government data \(OGD\)](#) was launched to help support the idea of greater openness and accountability in governance. This was later followed by the [Open Government Partnership \(OGP\)](#) between governments and civil society advocates currently counting [14 African government members](#) (out of 78 worldwide). The shared core underpinning of these two movements is that establishing an accessible (free) public data regime in countries will [promote democratic governance and improve transparency and accountability relations](#).

There is, however, a key difference between the two advocacy campaigns. As Afful-Dadzie and Afful-Dadzie (2017) find, while FOI campaigns focus on the law and legal arguments for the right to information, [OGD campaigns focus on the use of technology and digital solutions](#) for open data. The OGD approach is in that sense leveraging more on new technical possibilities for how governments can communicate and share information with their citizens. While fears of OGD [narrowing its focus too much to data access technologies](#) have been voiced, it now seems that in Africa – where FOI campaigns arguably have gained more traction than OGD – [should focus more on digital advantages](#) in providing citizens with access to information.

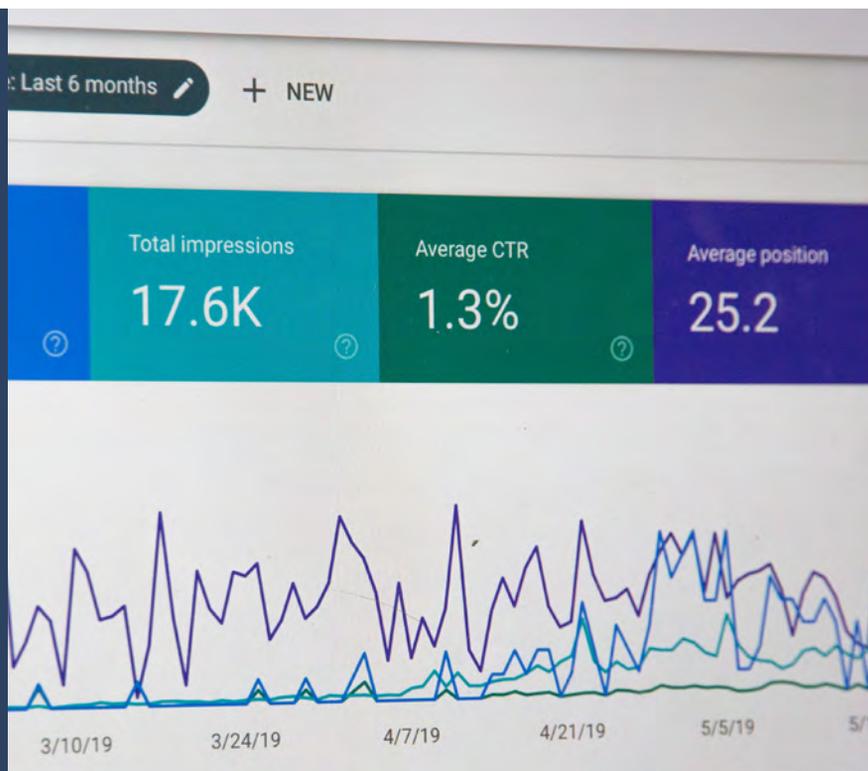
Some would argue that the main challenges of African 'access to information' regimes are more fundamental in nature than can be remedied by digital tools. The [key issues in implementing FOI in Africa](#) include poor archiving practices, history of oral communication, and the cost of producing information for the requester. ICTs and digital information platforms can [offer some practical technical solutions](#) to these issues by reducing costs and making it easier to create national government platforms for sharing information such as police and health records, education certificates, and so on. In sum, if implementation of right to information regimes are to be successful, policy discussions need to put [more emphasis on how to leverage technical possibilities](#) in realising fundamental rights to access to information. Good analogue practices must be supported by technical solutions.

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# WHAT GOOGLE TRENDS DATA CAN TELL US ABOUT THE TANZANIAN ELECTION

By Khamis Mutwafi | December 11, 2020



Over the last 5 years, Tanzania has seen a steady increase in [authoritarian](#) practices. This trend reached its climax in the recent general election when the ruling party CCM took a near clean sweep of all positions in an election where the Tanzania Election Watch observer group noted several developments which “[dampen the credibility of the electoral process](#).” One of the hallmarks of the election was the unprecedented suppression of the freedom of speech on social media, with platforms such as Twitter being systematically blocked. Also “lawfare” that preceded the election was concerning, with laws such as the Online Content Regulations and Cyber Crimes Act

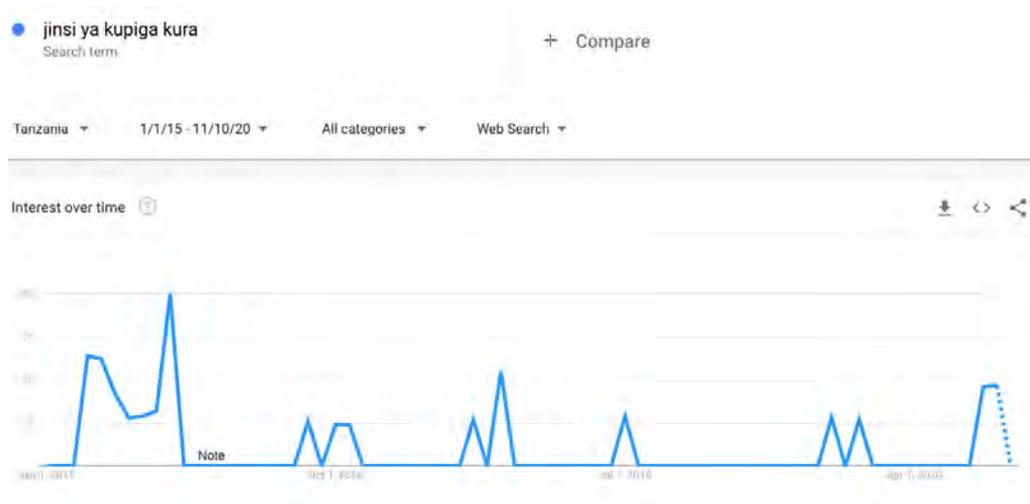
being passed which, for example required the development of an online register of all bloggers, required all cyber cafes to install CCTV cameras and imposed fines on those that fail to comply. The net result has been self-censorship on the internet, with the populace living in fear of falling foul of the numerous repressive laws that govern the digital space in Tanzania.

Despite the repression of the digital space, there is still one rich data source which can provide a glimpse behind the iron khanga that has fallen on Tanzania, and that is Google Trends. This Google search data is a collation of the information that people search for on the internet and can provide a glimpse into what has captured people’s attention, what they intend to do and how these information searches differ by geography among other things. This data provides a nuanced perspective on the recently concluded Tanzanian election. Importantly, this data is publicly available and unbiased.

## Voter Apathy was High

This is not a surprising or new finding, given that the electoral commission itself indicated that the overall voter turnout in the election was only approximately 50.72%. However, what is remarkable is the extent to which so few people actually searched for information on how to vote in the election indicating voter apathy in Tanzania is very high.

In the run-up to an election, and on election day itself, people seek information on how to vote and where to vote, and this is a strong indicator of interest in voting and forming an intent to go and vote. This can serve as a strong indicator of whether people will actually vote. Therefore, by comparing the number of people who searched for “how to vote” (“jinsi ya kupiga kura” in Swahili) in the run-up to the 2020 election it is possible to compare this with search patterns in the run up to previous elections, with 2015 being the strongest comparison. What we find is that the search volume for people who searched “how to vote” in 2020 was 47% the volume of the same search in 2015.

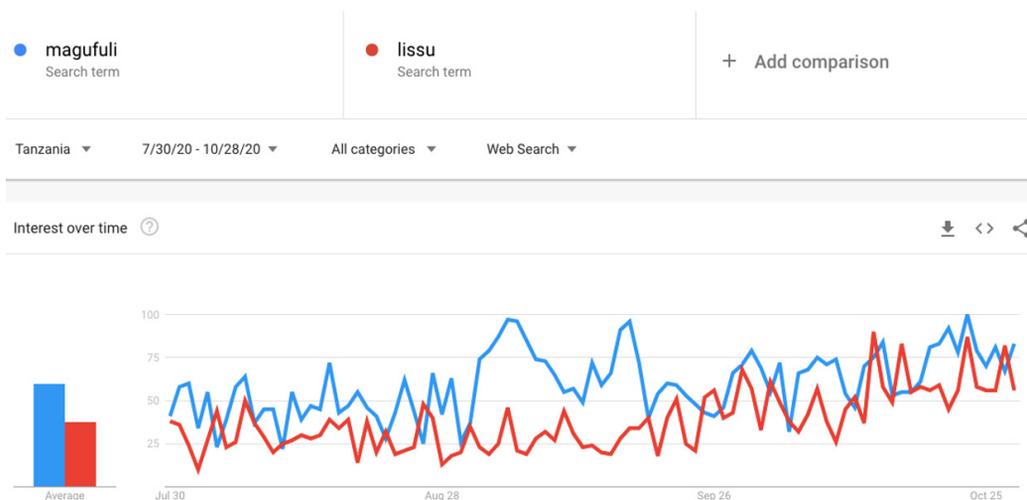


Note: Google Trends doesn't provide the raw volume of searches for any terms. Instead what they provide is the relative popularity of the term as a ratio of the total search volume. So where the term is 100, that indicates the highest possible search volume for the term and where it is 0 it is the lowest possible.

A more intriguing finding is that this figure is actually much lower than you would expect. Over the last 5 years, internet access and smartphone access in particular have increased significantly. According to the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA), internet penetration has increased from 34% in 2015 to 46% in 2019, an increase of approximately 8.5 million people having access to the internet. Therefore, holding all other factors constant, we would expect to see an increase in the number of people searching for information on how to vote in the 2020 election compared to the 2015 election. There are other possible explanations for this, such as better voter education meaning fewer people needed to search for this information. However, this is unlikely to have had such a significant effect. Therefore, the most significant factor that can explain this difference is higher voter apathy, which indeed was reflected in the voter turnout figures.

### Interest in the Opposition was Significant in the Run-up to the Election

In the run-up to the elections, the number of searches Tanzanians were making for information on President Magufuli was almost as significant as the number of searches they were making for the main opposition candidate Tundu Lissu. Below is a graph comparing search results for both candidates in the 90 days prior to the election date:



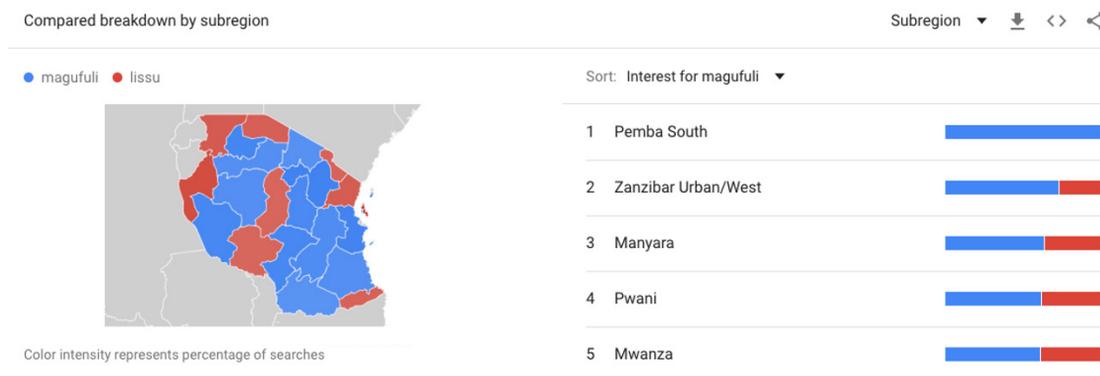
Note: Google Trends doesn't provide the raw volume of searches for any terms. Instead what they provide is the relative popularity of the term as a ratio of the total search volume. So where the term is 100, that indicates the highest possible search volume for the term and where it is 0 it is the lowest possible.

That both candidates are commonly searched for is not new either. It is interesting to note though that interest in Tundu Lissu steadily increased during the campaign period. Moreover, while interest does not translate into votes cast, it does serve as an indication that, at least in terms of interest, Lissu was almost as commonly searched for as President Magufuli. Of these searches, the most common search for President Magufuli was “Magufuli leo” (“Magufuli today”), indicating that most of those searching may be supporters looking to find the latest information on what the President was doing or saying. The most common search for Lissu over this period was in fact his full name,

which can be considered a more neutral search term. The second most common search term “Lissu leo” (“Lissu today”) which hints at some level of support, was searched far less, at 31% the rate of the most common search term. It is important to note that interest does not equate to votes cast, but can serve as an indication of the information voters were seeking in order to make an informed decision on the candidates.

## Interest in both Candidates Varied Significantly by Region

Interest in the two candidates varied significantly across different regions of the country. Search interest in President Magufuli compared to Lissu in the 90 days in the run up to the election was most significant in Pemba South (100%), Zanzibar Urban/West (73%), Manyara (64%), Pwani (62%) and Mwanza (61%). Conversely, interest in Lissu in comparison to President Magufuli was most significant in Zanzibar North and Central (100%), Kigoma (67%), Kagera (59%) and Tanga (58%).



Source: [Google Trends](#).

Interest in the candidates varied significantly across the country, with the President being most searched in the center of the country, while the main opposition candidate was more searched in the west of the country, in addition to Tanga and Kilimanjaro in the North-West and Mtwara in the South.

It is worth noting that while one might intuitively assume a relationship between interest and the areas candidates were from and voted, there are many cases in which this does not hold. For President Magufuli, interest was high in the region in which he voted (Dodoma, which is also the seat of government) in comparison to his opponent at 61% to 39%, which is suggestive of a significant relationship. However, in the region he is from (which is now Geita, but in the sub-region map which is yet to be updated is recognized as Kagera) the interest in his opponent was actually higher at 54% compared to 46%. Similarly, Tundu Lissa received 50% of the interest in Singida, where he was born and voted, but received more interest than the president in Kilimanjaro (54% to 46%). As these figures suggest, there is no simple rule that can be used to determine where each candidate received the most interest.

However, a significant limitation to this analysis is the limited search data that is available for many parts of Tanzania, which significantly limits the extent to which sub-national variations can be studied using this data. The only two places where significant data can be drawn at the city level is Dar es Salaam and Mwanza, for which President Magufuli was more commonly searched at 62% and 65% respectively. This is an important reminder that differential access to the internet in urban and rural areas means that internet data is a much more reliable guide to urban feelings and trends than to rural ones. It is also important to keep in mind that search volume may also have been adversely affected by the internet restrictions, particularly the day before the election, and that what appears to be apathy could in fact be a widespread popular concern to take all steps necessary to avoid being the victim of authoritarian repression.

Despite its limitations, Google trends provides a rich data source into the vastly under studied and shrinking democratic space of Tanzania. The data can provide insights into what is capturing the attention of Tanzanians, how it is changing over time and how interest compares to alternatives from information which is almost impossible to gather, given the numerous legal and practical limitations. Most significantly, this data is publicly available, aggregated, anonymous and unbiased.

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*Khamis Mutwafi is a researcher interested in Tanzanian politics.*

# IS WHATSAPP UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA?

By Nic Cheeseman, Jonathan Fisher, Idayat Hassan and Jamie Hitchen | December 11, 2020



There is growing concern about the potential for the message and media sharing platform WhatsApp to undermine democracy in a number of countries across the world including [Brazil](#) and [India](#).

Because WhatsApp is encrypted – and so offers users far greater protection from prosecution than Twitter or Facebook – it has become particularly notorious for spreading “fake news”.

This is a major concern in Africa, where WhatsApp is the most [popular messaging app in 40 countries](#) due to its low cost and the ability to easily share messages with both individuals and groups.

But is this really how WhatsApp is used? And if it is, to what extent does this compromise the quality of elections?

A joint team from the Centre for Democracy and Development (Nigeria) and the University of Birmingham (UK) has spent the last few months researching the impact of WhatsApp on the 2019 Nigerian elections held in May.

Their [report](#) comes to conclusions that are both troubling, as well as encouraging.

The research reveals that the platform was used to mislead voters in increasingly sophisticated ways. But it also shows that WhatsApp strengthened democracy in other areas.

## **Misinformation and disinformation**

The term “[fake news](#)” has become widely used over the past few years. However, it is problematic because it lumps together very different kinds of information and behaviour. For example, we need to separate out deliberate attempts to mislead others by creating false stories (disinformation) from the innocent sharing of made up stories by people who believe it to be true (misinformation).

The 2019 Nigerian elections saw both disinformation and misinformation. We studied this by conducting 46 interviews in the states of Abuja, Oyo and Kano, as well as seven focus groups and a survey of 1,005 people.

During the course of conducting the research candidates consistently told us that they predominantly used WhatsApp to share information about their qualities and campaign pledges. But many WhatsApp users said that at a high proportion of the messages they received were designed to undermine a rival leader’s reputation – to “decampaign” them.

There were some high profile examples of disinformation. The most notorious story circulated on social media was that the president had died while undergoing medical treatment outside of the country, and had [been replaced by a clone from Sudan](#).

Other fabricated communications were less outlandish but no less significant. Many ordinary citizens shared these messages, in some cases because they knew they were false and wanted to amplify their impact, but in many cases because they thought they were true.

The most effective decampaigning strategies were those that shared messages that resonated with individuals because they contained an element of the truth, or played on recent experiences.

## WhatsApp takes over

The political influence of WhatsApp has expanded rapidly in line with its growing penetration. As a result, it has become part of the fabric of election campaigns and is now a key mechanism through which political leaders seek to communicate with their campaign teams and supporters.

Fully 91% of the people we interviewed were active WhatsApp users; as one person put it:

*I use WhatsApp more than I use the toilet.*

In Nigeria, election candidates were already using the platform to [push messages in 2015](#). But the people we interviewed agreed that the [2019 elections](#) saw a significant step up in terms of how the leading parties organised their social media strategy.

Politically, WhatsApp was used in an increasingly sophisticated way at the presidential level. In 2019, the two main presidential candidates – President Muhammadu Buhari and opposition leader Atiku Abubakar – both had dedicated teams pushing out messages over social media: the [Buhari New Media Centre](#) and [Atikulated Youth Force](#). By forming hundreds of WhatsApp groups of 256 members, these organisations could send messages to tens of thousands of people at the touch of a button.

Buhari's effort was better funded and particularly impressive. It established a network of local and regional representatives connected to a "central command" in Abuja. This enabled the campaign to rapidly send messages from the national to the local level, while also responding to hostile messages and rumours shared by its rivals.

While those in power typically had more money to invest in their campaigns, many opposition leaders pointed out that in important ways WhatsApp had created a more level political playing field. Those who had been involved in politics for some time explained that "fake news" was nothing new in Nigeria, but that in the past it was sometimes impossible to counteract these messages because there was no way to get airtime on government aligned radio.

WhatsApp had changed this situation. Opposition leaders now have a cheap way of fighting back. It has also been used to coordinate anti-corruption campaigns and election observation, strengthening democracy.

## Evolution or revolution?

It's also important not to overstate the significance of WhatsApp. Things look very different below the national level, for example, where campaign structures were less developed and a significant proportion of activity remained informal.

We found that while candidates for Governor and Member of Parliament did set up WhatsApp groups, they were much less organised. In many cases, candidates relied on existing networks and social influencers to get the message out.

Candidates were also keen to stress that while they used WhatsApp during their campaigns, they did not rely on it. Voters expect to see their leaders on the ground, and expected them to provide a range of services for the community. Advertising good deeds over WhatsApp could help a leader get credit, but only if they had fulfilled their responsibilities in the first place.

In other words, WhatsApp can amplify and complement a candidate's ground campaign. But it cannot replace it.

### **Throwing out the bathwater but keeping the baby**

These findings suggest that solutions to the power of social media platforms like WhatsApp isn't to ban them, or to allow governments to censor them. This would merely exaggerate the vast advantages of incumbency that ruling parties already enjoy.

A better solution would be to promote [digital literacy](#), develop [social media codes of conduct](#) around elections, and empower WhatsApp users to control which groups they are added to, and what information they receive.

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# WHY SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISTS FACE AN UPHILL STRUGGLE IN ZIMBABWE

By Bruce Mutsvairo | February 23, 2021



Long considered economically and socially underdeveloped compared with the rest of the world, Africa has in recent years emerged as an important global player in many respects, helped in part by a set of factors including [rapid population growth](#) that is expected to reach 1.7 billion inhabitants by 2030 and 2.5 billion by 2050, an expanding urbanization and a growing, tech-savvy youth that is adopting ubiquitous technologies to demand transparency from its political leaders in a bid to [improve their lives and communities](#).

In spite of the seemingly endless prospects, ranging from abundant natural resources to fresh democratic transitions, albeit frequently fragile, a series of challenges remain firmly in place. It is important not only to highlight opportunities associated with digital technologies but also assess the political implications of expeditious technological changes that have dominated Africa's online space over the last few years. To do that, we need to look no further than nations such as Zimbabwe, a country which has long attracted international attention because of what critics see as a dismal freedom of press and human rights record.

### **The case of Hopewell Chin'ono**

Take the case of journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, who was recently released on bail after spending nearly three weeks in detention for "peddling falsehoods," a charge that could keep him in jail for 20 years should he be convicted. He is facing two more charges including that of promoting anti-government protests on social media. Chin'ono and his supporters think he is being targeted for exposing corruption on social media, but former Information Minister Bright Matonga disagrees. He told me from his base in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, "Zimbabwe has 1500 registered journalists. Thirty-five of these are foreign correspondents. They criticize the government daily. Citizens share their views on social media each day. They criticize the government, some criticize the president, but no one is getting arrested. The question should be 'why is he being arrested? – It's simply because he has a case to answer if you ask me.'" Matonga considers Chin'ono an activist rather than a journalist quipping "Political activist? Yes. Journalist? No way. If he is a journalist, show me his stories. Who does he work for?"

Critics have questioned why a government that has been trying to mend ties with several countries abroad would arrest journalists and political opponents. Matonga says engaging members the international community doesn't not mean those who break the law "should not be held accountable."

### **An uphill struggle**

It's clear social media activists in Zimbabwe face an uphill struggle in their attempts to use digital technologies to steer themselves toward the path of democratization. [Similar conclusions](#) have been highlighted by other contributors to this series on [Decoding Digital Democracy in Africa](#). [Digital access is not guaranteed](#) and shutdowns have emerged as the [easiest way to silence dissent](#).

In Zimbabwe, some, particularly the die-hard supporters of President Emmerson Mnangagwa even suggest the winds of change are sweeping away decades-old cynicism. They say under Mnangagwa, who took power in 2017, long-criticized draconian laws including [AIPPA](#), have either been repealed or remain under parliamentary review, more citizens are accessing digital platforms and in comparison to the Robert Mugabe era, digital dissent is being tolerated. Chin'ono, opposition officials and their ardent supporters certainly disagree.

Even as the West has openly been pushing Zimbabwean leaders to end decades of oppression, Mnangagwa's government has argued tyranny ended when the late Mugabe was removed from power in November 2017. Yet critics say Chin'ono's many arrests and those of opposition officials and other government critics are a testimony to the limitations of social media as a weapon against digital authoritarianism in Zimbabwe. In spite of his setbacks, Chin'ono continues to criticize the government of social media but to what effect?

## Looking beyond the Arab Spring

We need to ask why, despite early signs of optimism particularly during the 'Arab Spring,' is social media activism failing to remove the ruling ZANU PF party from power or at the very least make its officials accountable? Firstly, I think many Zimbabweans have a warped view of activism. I have met people, including opposition officials, who equate posting a message on Facebook or recording themselves saying a few words and sharing it with their friends and followers with activism. Getting 'likes' makes them feel good but again that doesn't threaten ZANU PF's stranglehold to power. Ugandan opposition leader Bobi Wine perhaps comes close to being a notable flagbearer of outright political activism in Africa even though his date with destiny has also been rocky. He has been directly involved not just on social media but also on the streets head to head, fighting against state-sponsored tyranny. Every political activist in Zimbabwe needs to realize toppling ZANU PF from power requires more than selfies and memes.

Digital activism in Zimbabwe lacks leadership, coordination and in some cases identity. Who are the legitimate leaders of the movement? What is their strategy? What exactly is their goal? Zimbabwe's political terrain remains muddy and bumpy. Fuchs, drawing on Habermas, has suggested that the availability of social media, specifically Twitter, has provided a [new arena for the public sphere of political communication](#), which carries, he argues, emancipatory connotations, claiming that social media allows people to openly participate in political deliberations online. However, from the perspective of the African public spheres, it is not immediately obvious whether citizens living in repressive political environments would agree with Fuchs' assertion given the constrained public spheres they find themselves living in. Add digital disinformation and misinformation to that, then it becomes clear ZANU PF officials will not be hurt by digitally-mediated activism.

While those opposed to the ruling ZANU-PF party consider social media as a godsend tool for potential political emancipation, history has taught us Zimbabwe's deeply-rooted problems will not be negotiated on social media. Last year, access to social media platforms was blocked amid government denials of digital interference while anti-government digital activists have previously faced treason charges.

Questions of control and censorship, state policing and surveillance of online political participation are all central to a discussion of the role of social media in promoting or denting democratization. It is important to emphasize the importance of empirically-driven research, which should be promoted to potentially give us more answers and capture the realities of this social media-democratization nexus.

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*Bruce Mutsvairo is a Professor of Journalism at Auburn University in the US.*

**Further reading**

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# HOW HASHTAG ACTIVISM MOVES OFFLINE IN THE GAMBIA

18

By Idayat Hassan and Jamie Hitchen | September 29, 2020



In The Gambia, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter are directly, and indirectly, shaping politics. The latest [We Are Social's Digital report](#) counted 370,000 social media users in The Gambia in January 2020: equivalent to 16% of the population and a 9.6% increase from April 2019. But these figures are not indicative of the number of Gambians with access to content shared on social media or on private messenger applications such as WhatsApp due to the prominence of phone sharing and the ways in which information originating online, penetrates offline.

Recent studies from [Nigeria](#), [Ghana](#), [Sierra Leone](#) and [Uganda](#) have illustrated some of the ways in which social media content is used by, and can shape, traditional media such as radio, TV and print. This is equally the case in The Gambia where radio talks shows, in particular, allow for a crossover of online content into offline spaces. Furthermore, the 16% of Gambians who are active on social media are disproportionately influential. In urban areas these can be political activists, journalists, social commentators and religious figures; the types of people who would conventionally shape political debate across traditional media.

There are also a growing number of young Gambians who have found their voice online and whose opinions shape those of their peers. In rural areas internet penetration is reduced, but in villages where perhaps just one or two smartphones are owned, these will often be in the possession of community, religious or women leaders. Information that these influential figures choose to share from social media comes with added authority, given their standing in society.

WhatsApp is the most prominent online platform for the sharing of information in The Gambia. Most 'forums' (WhatsApp groups) replicate offline organisations online; built around faith networks, family structures, political allegiances or community or educational associations. Audios, in the two main languages of Wolof and Mandinka, are the most effective, pervasive and prominent way of sharing information and exchanging views. With content ranging from discussions about politics and development, to efforts to build accountability in governance, to debates about religion.

The audio format allows smartphones to act as quasi-radios in villages where education levels remain low or mobile penetration is limited. "Even those who don't have access to smartphones and who have limited education can access the content as people will sit and play audios and videos that are in local languages in group village settings" notes Dr. Ismaila Cessay, a political science lecturer at the University of The Gambia "so even if a rural village has just one phone WhatsApp can make an impact".

## **Removing a dictator**

The transformative impact of social media came to the fore in the democratic ouster of Yahya Jammeh in 2016. Political organisation online, working closely with offline structures and actors, was key in uniting opposition and Jammeh's defeat at the polls. The same combination of online and offline mobilisation was then critical in ensuring that those results were respected. "Social media was very decisive in the 2016 elections" says Dr. Cessay, "first, it showed Jammeh was just an ordinary person, it helped to demystify him... and second, it played a key role in mobilising people and getting them to come together".

Facebook and WhatsApp groups were key tools for organisation, mobilisation and the sharing of information at the constituency level. Diaspora political organisers were supported by in-country allies, who worked to ensure these messages reached sympathetic ears. "We had separate WhatsApp groups for each constituency with

teams of volunteers on motorbikes and cars shuttling messages to key voters and voting blocks and extracting firm commitments of support” said one local organiser who was based in Central River Region, “we were so efficient in the micro-targeting of electors that we could count the votes we were likely to get even before the first ballot was cast”. This claim might be overselling the reality but according to Sait Matty Jaw, a lecturer at the University of The Gambia, “this kind of outreach significantly helped the ground game of the [opposition] coalition”.

The results of the December election revealed, Adama Barrow, the opposition candidate, to be the winner. Having initially accepted the outcome, Jammeh then rejected the results and called for new elections. But Gambians, at home and abroad, refused to cede ground. #GambiaHasDecided became their rallying cry. The hashtag was used to spread messaging online to regional and international audiences – across Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The hashtag also took on a life of its own offline, spreading onto the streets of The Gambia.

It was spray-painted on walls in downtown Serekunda, billboards with the slogan sprung up across the country as quickly as they were torn down by security agents and thousands of free t-shirts emblazoned with #GambiaHasDecided on the front were distributed and worn by Gambians. The movement emboldened citizens and gave public support to an under pressure electoral commission. It was a key part of the domestic effort, supported by the intervention of ECOWAS leaders, that ensured the December 2016 result was upheld.

## **Growing online organisation**

Given its involvement in the 2016 vote, the usefulness of social media for political organisation and the sharing of campaign messaging and information is something that all political parties are keenly aware of.

“Social media will play a significant role in the 2021 presidential election” says Dr. Ceessay, “it was already prominent in 2016, but next year there will be more Gambians online, a freer environment and more content for them to consume”.

In February 2020, Gambia Democratic Congress had 53 WhatsApp groups, each with the maximum 256 members that it used to push political messages. The United Democratic Party, Jammeh’s long-time opposition, had at least 64 groups, the People’s Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism had 23 and President Barrow’s newly created, National People’s Party (NPP) already had 17. The NPP can also call on the support of the President Barrow Youths for National Development (PBYFND). Officially established to give youth the chance to support the president’s activities and help him realise his agenda, it has developed a sizeable online and offline presence and has been criticised for being more like a political party than the implementation focussed support group the government claims it to be.

The Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), Jammeh’s former party has the largest – over 100 – and most sophisticated network of WhatsApp forums.

It uses these groups to partially finance activities. Members are required to pay a small D100 (US\$2) joining fee, and groups can be asked to contribute further to specific activities such as rallies. Two smaller WhatsApp groups made up exclusively of party executives, work on developing content and the strategies for dissemination and an APRC 'CyberWarriors' WhatsApp group – composed of both people in diaspora and in The Gambia – are designated with the task of defending the party on Facebook.

## **Election expectations**

Elections are still over a year away, but WhatsApp will be a key election communication tool for all political parties in the 2021 contest. “Even though 60% of Gambians are uneducated and living in rural areas, it is still possible to reach them with voice notes in local languages if you take phones to these communities and play messages” says Ansu Singateh, president of the PDYFND. Pointing to a merging of more traditional offline campaign activities, with online approaches. In addition, allowing diaspora voting for the first time remains a possibility, which would likely increase the efforts that parties make to engage voters online.

WhatsApp and Facebook have the potential to support more engaged citizen interaction with authorities and to widen the opportunity for debate and discussion. However, they can also reinforce and exacerbate pre-existing ethnic and political divisions in The Gambia. This is a challenge as the country seeks to conclude its delicate transitional justice process and hold its first post-Jammeh elections.

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*Idayat Hassan is the director of the Centre for Democracy and Development.*

*Jamie Hitchen is an independent researcher.*

# SOCIAL MEDIA, THE DIASPORA, AND THE POLITICS OF ETHNICITY IN ETHIOPIA

By [Azeb Madebo](#) | September 29, 2020



On Monday 29 June I noticed my social media feeds become overwhelmed with posts about the sudden death of Hachalu Hundessa, an ethnically Oromo singer who garnered fame for his Afaan Oromoo [music](#) during Ethiopia's 2015-2018 anti-government protests.

Initial discourse on social media centered on shock, sadness, and fear. Devastated fans mourned and revealed the different ways in which his music personally impacted them. They often remembered his music as the soundtrack to the Oromo experience and protests of the mid-to-late 2010s.

Not knowing the details behind his assassination, initial discourse on social media was dominated by the circulation of [speculative arguments](#) and misinformation. While some reasoned that [Egypt](#) was inciting ethnic conflict to undermine Ethiopia's plans to begin [filling](#) the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the most widespread speculation [implied](#) that Hachalu's death was an ethnically motivated ([anti-Oromo](#)) political assassination. Adherents of the later view suggested his assassination was orchestrated by either the Ethiopian government or Ethiopian nationalists (also referred to as *neftegnas/neo-neftegnas*).

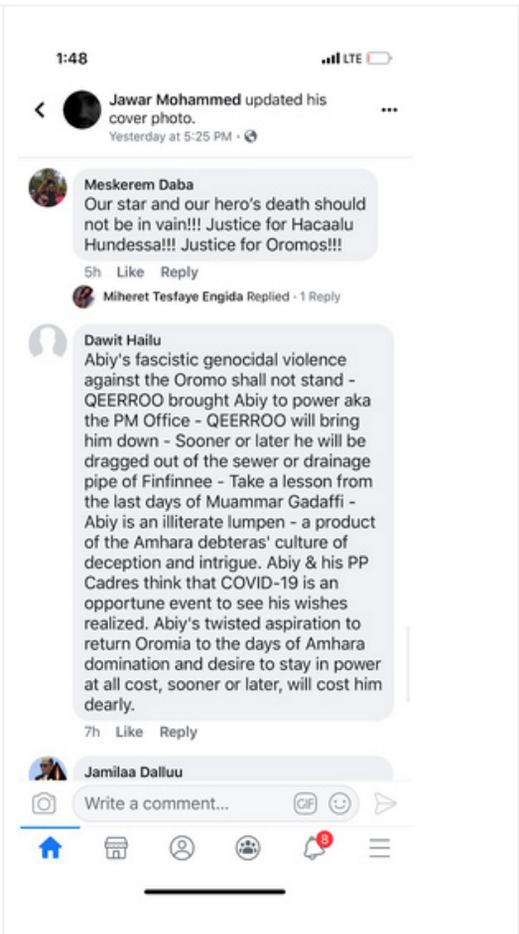
Pointing to Hachalu's last [interview](#) on Oromia Media Network (OMN), a network established in Minnesota by the now jailed opposition politician Jawar Mohammed, they claimed that Hachalu was at risk of attack because he not only criticized and joked about Emperor Menelik II but because he was vocal about living with [constant death threats](#). However, a version of the [interview](#) later released by the Ethiopian government showed that Hachalu feared for his life not because of Abiy Ahmed's government or *neftegnas/neo-neftegnas* but because his [refusal to participate](#) in divisive and extremist Oromo ethnic politics that had earned him death threats from ethno-nationalist Oromo groups like the Oromo Liberation Front Shane – Group (OLF-SG).

Within hours of the singer's death, Oromo politicians and activists like Jawar Mohammed were calling for the [burial](#) of Hachalu's body in Addis Ababa rather than in Hachalu's hometown of Ambo – where the government stated Hachalu's family wanted the burial. OMN televised and streamed a video of Hachalu's body being transferred to Ambo. Crowds of young Oromo protesters, often identified as Qeerroo/Qarree (unmarried young men/women or youth in Afaan Oromoo), attended the [televised](#) event and gave impassioned speeches about Hachalu's death and the grievances of the Oromo people. They called for the unity of Oromo people, the dismantling of Emperor Menelik II's statue, the burial of Hachalu's body in its place, and even asserted it was time to get rid of the *neftegnas*.

Along with Qeerroo/Qarree, Jawar Mohammed and his security team [intercepted](#) the transport of Hachalu's body to Ambo and forced its [return](#) to the Addis Ababa. Once back in Addis Ababa, officials reported that a [confrontation](#) over Hachalu's body ensued between opposition politicians, namely Jawar, and government officials. As a result, an Oromia special force member guarding Hachalu's body was reportedly killed by a member of Jawar's personal security detail. According to [reports](#), Jawar and his team attempted to topple the government by instrumentalizing the singer's death. The federal government responded by arresting political opposition leaders and accusing Oromo ethno-nationalists of instigating violence through media platforms like Facebook and OMN.

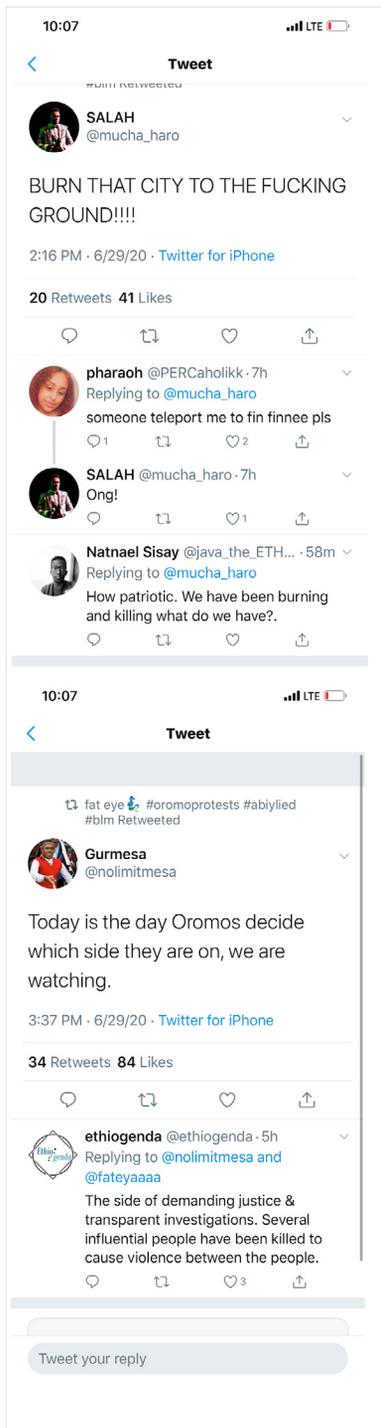


**Image 1:** Facebook users responding to one of Jawar's posts by blaming neftegna and calling for violence

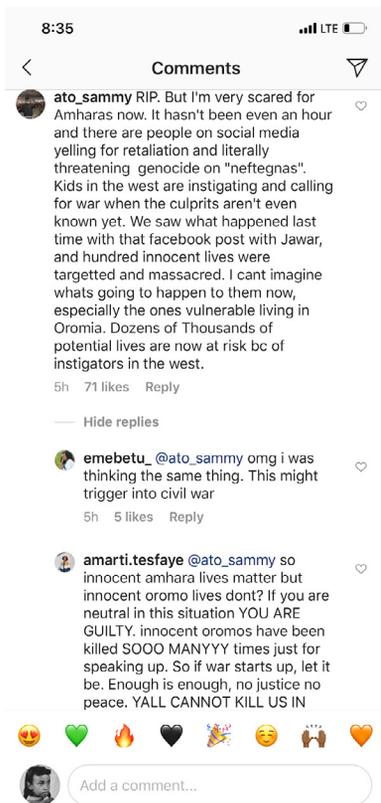


**Image 2:** Facebook users responding to one of Jawar's posts criticizing Abiy Ahmed and blaming Amharas

As tensions amplified, some Ethiopians expressed fear of the retaliatory violence that could be set in motion if Hachalu's death became politicized and prematurely characterized as an ethnically motivated attack against the Oromo Ethiopian singer (see examples 3 and 4 below).



**Image 3:** Twitter users reacting to Hachalu's death



**Image 4:** Instagram users discussing possible outbreak of ethnic violence against minorities on @Shadesofinjera

The government implemented a country-wide internet shutdown as a **tactic** to contain the spread of dis/misinformation as well as calls for violent and ethnically politicized protests which resulted in the massacre of Amharas, Orthodox Christians, other ethnic minorities living in Oromia as well as Oromos who tried to protect ethnic minorities. Some Western **media** reported that while the Nobel Peace Prize winning prime minister has been commended for his initial efforts to democratize the country, his decision to implement a **shutdown** was undemocratic and repressive. His actions seemed to echo previous Ethiopian government leaders' use of internet shutdowns – most notably during the 2016 protests when the government clamped down on protesters through a state of emergency decree and imposition of a nine-month-long internet shutdown. However, criticisms against Abiy Ahmed failed to account for how the technological affordances of the internet, which enable political participation in repressive contexts, can also be harnessed to incite violence and spread disinformation.

### The uses and meanings of (neo)neftegna

Some of the most vocal Oromo Ethiopian social media users in the diaspora sought justice for Hachalu by immediately assigning responsibility to what they perceived and portrayed as a *neftegna/neo-neftegna* system – often employing a binary *us vs. they/them* rhetoric. Their rhetoric notably aligned with a statement Jawar Mohammed posted on Facebook before the internet shutdown:



**THEY DID NOT JUST KILL HACHALU HUNDESSA. THEY SHOT AT THE HEART OF THE OROMO NATION, ONCE AGAIN !! IT WAS TADESSE BIRU, HAILE FIDA, ELEMU QILXUU, EEBBISAA ADDUNYAA ... NOW HACAALUU! YOU CAN KILL US, ALL OF US, YOU CAN NEVER EVER STOP US!! NEVER!!**



### La Aluta Continua !!

Naming prominent Oromo activists, nationalists, and cultural figures who died at the hands of different Ethiopian political regimes, Jawar's use of "they" strategically referred to Ethiopian governments and Ethiopian nationalists. Many other Oromo social media users **echoed** Jawar's sentiment and laid blame on *they/them* as well as *(neo)neftegna* – which other Ethiopians took as **coded language** for Amhara and Ethiopian nationalists (see examples above).

Historically, *neftegna* has been used to refer to imperial settler-soldiers who were given locals' lands in an effort to incorporate areas that resisted the expansion of Ethiopia under Menelik II (Assefa, 2018). *Neftegna* literally means musketeer. The *neftegna*, usually coming from northern Ethiopia, became a privileged class in the areas where they settled. They were given land, assigned local laborers (farmers and tribute-paying

peasants), and at times even replaced the traditional leadership. This approach to social control and nation building created long-standing tensions as it failed to not only equitably incorporate the over eighty different ethno-linguistics groups that came to constitute Ethiopia but also to create an Ethiopian national identity that has widespread acceptance.

In the aftermath of Hachalu's death, *neftegna* and *neo-neftegna system* were deployed to criticize the lingering effects of Ethiopia's state and nation-building processes, those from the Amhara ethnic group, as well as non-Amhara Ethiopians that champion pan-Ethiopianism. Those using *neftegna* and *neo-neftegna* claim the term is not an attack against the Amhara, but against a [system](#) of oppression within Ethiopia – a system which has disproportionately favored Amharic speakers in the political and cultural representation of the country – particularly in the country's capital of Addis Ababa .

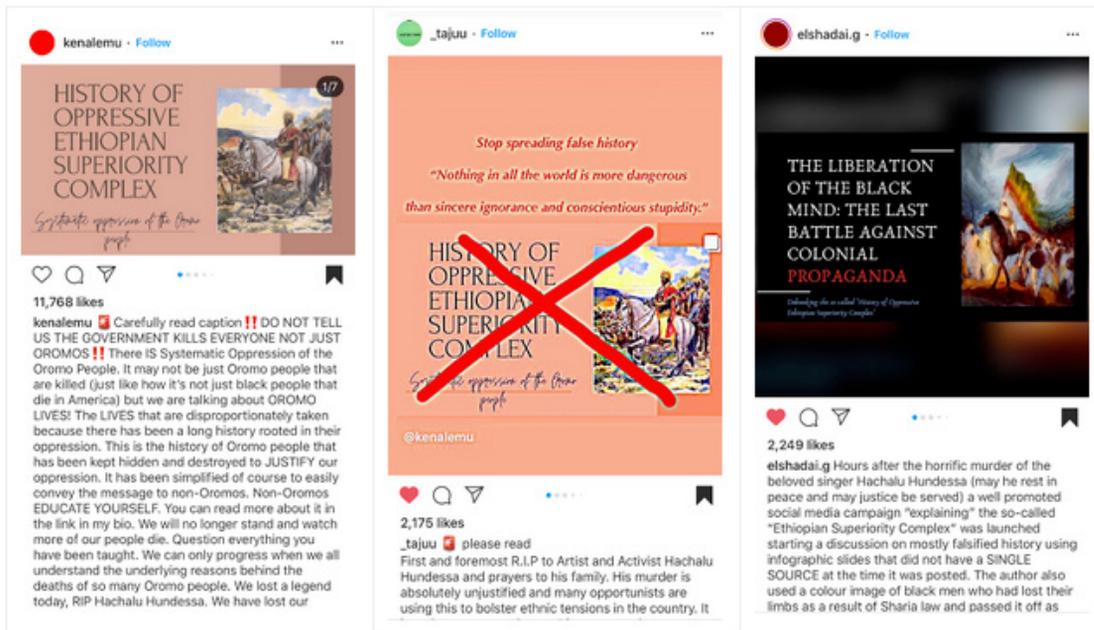
Nonetheless, while *neftegna* and *neo-neftegna* are argued to be neutral terms for highlighting structural inequities, they are often deployed to promote hostility toward northern Ethiopians, particularly the Amhara, followers of Orthodox Christianity, and proponents of a pan-Ethiopian identity.

## **Diasporic engagement and media**

Though the internet shutdown left locals without internet access and lent the Ethiopian government to Western criticism, it positioned diaspora Ethiopians at the helm of efforts to shape the narrative for Western and international audiences.

During Ethiopia's over two-week-long complete internet blackout, Ethiopia's ideologically and ethnically split diaspora seized the internet's capacity to facilitate discourse and on-the-ground [action](#) within places like North America, the United Kingdom, and Germany (see also [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)). The diaspora(s) used social media to launch competing information campaigns, petitions, protest marches, and fundraising campaigns (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). They collectivized around protest [campaigns](#) like [Oromo Protests](#) (also see [oromoprotests.org](#)) or [Peace for Ethiopia](#) (see also [Justice and Peace for Ethiopia](#)). At times, social media users appealed to Western and international support by influencing [politicians](#) (also see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), [organizations](#), and media reports by authoring [commentaries](#) and news articles as well as [speaking](#) on behalf of Ethiopians in the homeland.

Frustrated diaspora members, especially those who didn't agree with the protest tactics of extreme ethno-nationalists, attempted to [fact-check](#), [report](#), and [complicate](#) what they saw as harmful dis/misinformation and identity politics. Oromo protesters countered these attempts by claiming fact-checkers and counter-protesters were dismissing the underlying grievances of the Oromo and attempting to undermine their protests. At times they [falsely equated](#) the [violence](#) perpetuated by state forces against Qeerroo/Qarree protesters and the violence committed against minorities in Oromia by Qeerroo/Qarree and Oromo militants.



As reports of rising death counts at the hands of government police and Qeerroo came out of Ethiopia, I witnessed a number of [heartfelt discussions](#) on Instagram. Pages like [@Shadesofinjera](#) and [@soundthehorn\\_](#) hosted Instagram Live events which allowed young diaspora Ethiopians across ethnic lines to talk about Ethiopian history, their identities, grievances, hopes for the future, and the events surrounding Hachalu's death. Many social media users acknowledged Ethiopia's problems with linguistic, cultural, and political representation.

In these talks, young Oromo participants expressed their frustration with the lack of equitable representation and opportunities – sharing [stories](#) about having their Ethiopianness questioned and denied in Ethiopian/diasporic spaces as well as the frustration of not being rightfully recognized as integral parts of Ethiopian culture and history. However, Oromos who identified as Ethiopian, upheld their mixed ethnic heritage, and/or sought to problematize extreme ethno-nationalism complained of Oromo and Ethiopian nationalists' essentializing takes on identity.

Others vented that the disinformation campaigns used by ethno-nationalist protesters and the ethnic animus toward Amhara and other ethnic minorities back home would only lead to more tensions and undermine any progress that has already been made. Some argued that the protracted ethnic [identity politics of the diaspora](#) was costing Ethiopians in the homeland a chance at a better future.

## The impacts of media representation

During this internet shutdown, Western and international media often reported on the Oromo Protests by using simplistic social justice frames. Repeatedly portraying binary narratives of the oppressor and oppressed, leaving out important details regarding the political assassination of Hachalu, and romanticizing the politics of extremist ethno-nationalists like Jawar Mohammed.

Uncritical reporting on these events resulted in the uptake of biased stories as news (usually intended for western audiences) and allowed highly vocal and partial diaspora members to speak on behalf of local Ethiopians with authority. While there needs to be sustained criticism against Ethiopia's government for extrajudicial killings, wrongful incarceration of protesters, and infringement on Ethiopians' rights, it's also important to recognize that some protesters and opposition politicians are mobilizing historical grievances and identities for political gain and retaliation against perceived historical enemies. Diasporic Ethiopians' engagements with the ethnic politics behind Hachalu's assassination not only reveal the complexities of Ethiopia's political climate but also the ways in which the frames used to illustrate social issues profoundly influence how audiences understand and respond to them.

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# HOW YOUNG, QUEER NIGERIANS USE TWITTER TO FIGHT HOMOPHOBIA

By Paul Onanuga | February 23, 2021



Nigeria continues to be [largely homophobic](#), mainly as a result of cultural and religious conventions. Negative perceptions of homosexuality led to the [criminalisation](#) of same-sex relations in 2014. The Nigerian environment is therefore toxic for LGBTI people. They become [easy prey](#) to oppressive and exploitative state security apparatus. They are also vulnerable to public “moral police” who seek to make homosexual performance invisible and closeted.

One may assume that the [marginalised](#) Nigerian same-sex community and its allies have conceded to the widespread societal ostracisation. But that would be to ignore the

vigorous advocacies that have been going on in the country's cultural production and on social media.

Films and literary texts have been the more [studied](#) genres where same-sex agency has been iterated and reinforced. In [Nollywood](#) – the country's film industry – early [depictions](#) were [constructed](#) by non-LGBTI people who seemed to latch on public inquisitiveness for financial gains.

More recently, however, members of the Nigerian queer community have taken over the task of shaping their public image and identity, to reasonable success, in these creative ventures. They have done so through movies as well as a growing body of [literary](#) writings.

Social media, however, can be considered more potent as a medium which, to the authors of [The Alternative Media Handbook](#), gives voice to “the socially, culturally and politically excluded”.

By unpacking “live” data from members of the queer community, one can identify the challenges as well as advocacies in Nigerian digital queer discourse. That's what I did in a [study](#) of queer Nigerian Twitter. To explore the diversity of queer agency, I analysed selected tweets by Nigerian queer men. As a linguist, my focus was on identifying and discussing how the performative use of language can achieve the functions of coming out as well as confronting homophobic cyberbullying.

## **Twitter as a safer space**

Twitter has [grown](#) to become a very popular microblogging platform in Nigeria, accounting for about 1.75 million users, with an annual growth rate of 4.4%. Communities with shared interests are built online. The queer community in Nigeria is no doubt on the margins, but it has found [digital platforms](#) safe havens for collective queer voices.

The digital space, I found, has become a location for the representation and assertion of queer agency. What I found interesting in these narratives was that these commenters were not only ready to come out on a “public” digital space, they were also expressive in revealing their offline identities. This despite the possibilities of homophobic violence.

In expressing and owning their sexuality online, Nigerian queers, for instance through their Twitter names, spell out their sexuality as they incorporate vocabulary like “gay”, “homo” and “queer”. And they use the [rainbow](#) – a global symbol of LGBTI advocacy – in their Twitter handles and names.

They also own their profiles by either using their personal images or other suggestive queer-positive ones to indicate their sexual orientation. These realisations are central to queer agency, especially as the users I analysed live in Nigeria and are willing to challenge the existing normative sexuality structures. For example:

“This year I accepted the entirety of my sexuality and it’s one thing I’m very grateful about. I remember those days when I use to beat myself, cut myself, cry, pray and do all shits for being gay. Those days that I had to go to various priests for deliverance and guidance.”

This Twitter user reveals their sexual orientation within a narrative which expresses the difficulties of their lived reality. What is striking is the conviction of self-acceptance and the roles played by the online queer community in the affirmation of this.

### **Anti-homophobic advocacy**

Even more exciting is how these Twitter users engage in anti-homophobic advocacy. They turn the narrative around by exploiting online platforms towards positive self-presentation. They also respond to and challenge their cyber-aggressors and other homophobic commentators. They further acknowledge the necessity of support, like this tweet:

“Nigerian parents need peer support groups; especially parents with LGBTQ kids. I think one of the reasons they suffer so much is that they don’t know/talk to each other and they think they are alone. But there are lots of parents going through the same struggles across Nigeria.”

This acknowledges the role of the family as a domain of socialisation in normalising same-sex relations. Or this: “I think that social media really helps our generation with this. I wonder if they’re too far gone to also take advantage.”

This extends the discussion to the advantages of social media in queer outreaches. The tweets I analysed draw attention to, among others, the role of family relationships, homosexual allies and larger non-queer communities in helping Nigerian LGBTI people express and accept themselves. The advocacies are geared towards providing information concerning the naturalness of their sexual orientation.

### **Rewriting the narrative**

The tweets have sociological implications as ways of creating meaning. They humanise the commenters as legitimate members of Nigerian society and attest to the naturalness of queer identities. The online discussions provide visibility for a marginalised community.

Since the tweets contest the normative portrayals of same-sex relations, they also constitute activist representations. These queer Nigerian males use digital platforms for the purpose of identity formation. In this self-assertion, they contest the monochromic representations perpetuated in popular culture.

The tweets I studied speak out against the bigotry and hate messages which are directed at them. They accentuate the human rights concern that a person’s sexuality is

their personal decision. And they correct the perspective that problematises homosexuality as being the same as other social ills.

More crucially, I conclude, in view of the stifling and homophobic lived realities in Nigeria, these narratives engender conversations around the issue of queer visibility and acceptance within Nigerian society.

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# SHORT ON STRATEGY: WHATSAPP USE IN THE UGANDAN ELECTIONS

By Grace Natabaalo, Lulu Jemimah, Jamie Hitchen and Eloïse Bertrand | January 11, 2021



This week's general election in Uganda concludes a unique campaign. In July 2020, the Electoral Commission announced restrictions in response to the threat posed by Covid-19 that would provide for 'scientific' elections – campaigning on media and online platforms rather than in-person public interaction. Officially introduced as a public health measure, these restrictions have been disproportionately applied against opposition candidates, amidst a campaign characterised by high levels of [violence](#).

These 'scientific' campaigns provide an opportunity to learn more about the use of social media and messaging platforms by political parties and candidates. Supported by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, we conducted 47 interviews with parliamentary candidates from all major parties, campaign activists and civil society representatives across eight districts in November and December 2020, to better understand how parliamentary candidates have made use of WhatsApp during their campaign.

## Being present

Almost all candidates running for parliament in Uganda have created a handful of WhatsApp groups to support their campaign efforts. Smaller groups are comprised of local party activists involved in the candidate's campaign who use it to discuss logistics – though several people expressed doubts about the platform's security and said they did not use it for sharing sensitive information. Larger, more open groups are where candidates share content – text, audio, images and, to a lesser extent, video – with supporters about their plans for the constituency and evidence of their ongoing campaign activity. A WhatsApp group filled to its 256-member capacity in theory allows an aspirant to engage with more voters than they could at a restricted rally where the maximum is 200 people.

In some instances, candidates are personally responsible for producing and sharing this type of content, but many have campaign assistants or managers to produce it on their behalf. Payment for these volunteers comes in the form of mobile data and in some instances the purchase of new phones. Candidates spoke of spending around UGX30,000 (\$8) per day on social media; a not inconsequential amount but still a small sum when compared to the broader [cost of running for parliament in Uganda](#).

Aspirants agree that it is necessary to be present online but did not appear to have a specific strategy. For the most part they are creating content about their activities and election promises or providing reactions to ongoing events and sharing these into established groups, with the expectation that these group members will share more widely with other voters on WhatsApp. Specific WhatsApp, or even social media strategies designed to boost turnout, win over new voters, discredit rivals, or tally vote counts were notably absent.

## Little party coordination

The bulk of social media efforts in Uganda are centred around the presidential race. Party structures, in much the same way as they do [offline](#), do not provide much guidance or strategic advice on how to run a political campaign to a parliamentary aspirant on a platform like WhatsApp. "Much of the social media work is dependent on the creativity of volunteers and activists" according to one Forum for Democratic Change campaign agent in Kasese.

That is not to say that party WhatsApp groups do not exist. Most candidates mentioned that there were party groups run from the centre, and in some cases at the sub-region or district levels, but that these were more channels for the sharing of information – manifesto commitments and activities of the presidential candidate for example – than places for strategic discussion.

Despite their youthful base and prominence on social media, the opposition National Unity Platform, does not have a strategy for mobilising using online tools. According to one senior party official, “it’s a citizen-led movement and we give liberty to the citizens to take the lead”. Other opposition parties such as the Alliance for National Transformation and Democratic Party have invested some energy in supporting their local branches and parliamentary candidates by creating groups for aspirants to exchange information, but this support remains limited. The ruling National Resistance Movement has been making concerted efforts to shape public discourse around the elections through a network of Facebook accounts. But these were engaged in coordinate inauthentic behaviour according to a Facebook statement that [accompanied their suspension](#) – an accusation the government has denied.

Women candidates could benefit from greater support given the additional challenges they face when engaging online. Abuse, unwanted advances, and attacks on their character were regularly mentioned in the interviews conducted and reflect a wider issue with [Uganda’s online environment](#).

## **A question of access**

There are more Ugandans online than ever before, but there still remain significant challenges to getting online. Smartphones are expensive, network coverage is poor in rural areas and the cost of data is high. The much maligned [over-the-top \(OTT\) tax](#), a daily tax of UGX200 (S0.05) introduced in July 2018 for social media users, is still a significant cost increase for the unemployed or underemployed Ugandans. Others refuse to pay it out of principle. Virtual private networks (VPNs) help to get around the tax, but are a drain on data.

Most parliamentary candidates recognised the limiting role of OTT and noted that, whilst it was not an obstacle for them, it could be for prospective recipients of their campaign messages. Candidates still see offline campaigns as integral to electoral success and SMS remains an effective way of reaching out remotely. Furthermore, in rural constituencies, aspirants estimated that perhaps only 10% of registered voters, predominantly younger members of society, even had the ability to access WhatsApp.

However, as previous research in [Sierra Leone](#) and [The Gambia](#) has highlighted, the influence of WhatsApp is not simply confined to users who have direct access. In Uganda, [journalists increasingly use social media](#) channels to report stories, while among the population WhatsApp users can relay rumours and stories they read to friends and family members.

## Rallies still resonate

A major use of WhatsApp is to amplify physical campaigns online. An FDC candidate in the district of Mbarara explained that without in-person campaign activities, “we don’t have anything to share [on WhatsApp]”. The connection between online debates and offline events remains strong and points to the continued importance of grassroots interactions.

However, both spaces are increasingly constrained and controlled. It remains to be seen if the government will [shut down the internet](#) on or after 14 January, as it did in 2016 but already there are reports that the internet [is slowing down](#) and some sites that allow for the downloads of VPNs are [being blocked](#). Uganda’s ‘scientific’ elections may well take place in an analogue environment.

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# ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

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From the mid-2000s onwards, the "digital revolution" raised hopes of democratic transformation and strengthening in Africa. Yet, today, this techno-optimism co-exists with the techno-pessimist realisation that digital technologies can also be used to sustain authoritarianism, and that social media may exacerbate distrust and ethnic tensions. How, then, should we make sense of the complex interplay between digital technologies, politics and society? This collection of 20 essays both summarises and advances the latest research and policy debates, enabling a fresh and timely understanding of some of the biggest issues facing the continent today - from internet shutdowns and AI regulation to social media mobilization, disinformation and government surveillance. Written by leading scholars and civil society voices, the essays highlight a range of critical issues and key trends, opening up a vibrant research agenda.

# ABOUT DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

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**Democracy in Africa** [[www.democracyinafrica.org](http://www.democracyinafrica.org)] is dedicated to building a bridge between academics, policymakers, practitioners and citizens. We focus on inviting academics to share their work on African politics in accessible formats, encouraging engagement and wide-ranging debate. Our hope is that the website will encourage more people to study democracy in Africa and to make it easier for those who are already working in, and on, the continent to share ideas and information. We are positive about the prospects for democracy in Africa and believe that more time, resources, and energy should be put into understanding the complexities of politics at a local, national, regional and global level.

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