

## **ASSESSING THE IMPACT**

on Political Communication and Civic Engagement in Uganda

Edited by Mathias Kamp



### REALITY CHECK

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA on Political Communication and Civic Engagement in Uganda

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#### January 2016

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#### Introduction

Mathias Kamp, Country Representative, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Uganda and South Sudan

For many years the media evolution from print to radio, to TV and now online media has continued to influence mass opinions and perceptions. However, the emergence of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube has taken this very concept a step further, with some arguing that social media now shape the opinions, perception and actions of the majority whose opinions were previously shaped by information from traditional and mainstream media houses.

Today's web and the new media underpin the ability to create instant communication sensations. From Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and a collection of blogs, a news statement can advance from zero to 20 million viewers overnight. The viral nature of this highly social, user-driven environment enables complete strangers to connect over common beliefs, desires or interests and together create winners and losers.

In what we refer to as the "information age" or "digital age" our technological advancements in the area of ICT have helped overcome limitations of time and space in communication, information sharing and networking. This not only affects how we connect with other people and how we do business, but also how we interact in the political sphere. In that context, social media can be considered as a potential tool for facilitating the social contract between the citizens and the state. For example, government can potentially use social media platforms to solicit feedback on its policies and political actions, while citizens can use the same platforms to express and vent their anger, frustrations or acceptance of whatever actions government is undertaking. Online tools and social media can open new avenues for participation. Social media platforms can help citizens explore new ways of cooperation and collective action, they can provide opportunities for mobilising people around a common cause or for sensitising the public on specific issues. Unlike traditional media, social media are an open space, potentially giving every individual a means to directly reach out to the public. The advancement of

online content and social media has greatly expanded the variety of sources of information.

Telling stories to the general public, providing crucial information and influencing perceptions is no longer a preserve of traditional media. The difference remains that social media because of its unregulated nature can disseminate news without any filter or direct control, while traditional media houses still perform the function of an intermediary who filters, analyses and explains information before it goes public.

If we consider access to information and participatory engagement key features of democracy, then we can argue that the rise of internet and social media can have a democratising effect on our modern societies. But how strong is this democratising impact in reality? Does the availability of diverse information in the open space of the internet enhance transparency and accountability? Or does the explosion of unfiltered information rather produce more confusion, populism, defamation and hate speech? Do we see a more informed and active citizenry? Or are we rather looking at a generation of "slacktivists" or "clicktivists" as some observers argue?

#### **KAS Uganda Social Media Conference 2015**

The questions above provided a starting point for the first annual Social Media Conference organised by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) in conjunction with the Centre for Media Literacy and Community Development (CEMCOD) and the African Centre for Media Literacy (ACME) in July 2015. The conference under the theme "Assessing the Impact of Social Media on Political Communication and Civic Engagement in Uganda" brought together key stakeholders from government, civil society and the media to have a constructive exchange on the opportunities and risks of the growing social media sphere and to assess the impact it has on citizen-state engagement.

About 180 participants - public communicators, political leaders, civil society activists, representatives from the regulating authorities, journalists, bloggers, media owners, producers, and scholars – discussed these risks and opportunities from different angles. Separate panel discussions looked at the perspectives of political leaders, media practitioners and civil society actors. While there

was consensus that the advantages of social media outweigh the disadvantages, the views differed as to how exactly the opportunities can be fully exploited while averting the risks.

Some key questions that emerged in the discussions will require further consideration and more detailed discussions: How can social media be used more effectively for political communication by political parties and candidates? How can state and government institutions use social media in order to bring their services closer to the people? Are social media platforms and blogs a threat to professional journalism or a meaningful complementary tool? How should media houses react to the rise of alternative channels through social media? How can civil society actors use social media to strengthen civic engagement? How can online engagement translate into real action?

The conference by KAS, CEMCOD and ACME provided an important contribution to the ongoing debate, especially since it facilitated a constructive dialogue among a wide range of stakeholders. In light of the importance of the topic and the interest expressed by all stakeholders, KAS will continue engaging in this area. This publication is another step in that direction. It builds on the discussions of the conference and takes them further and into wider circles. Just like the conference, the publication provides insights from different perspectives, compiling contributions from media experts and practitioners, civil society activists and political analysts.

#### **Context of Social Media Engagement in Uganda**

Within the Ugandan context, social media users are mostly urban elite, students, youth, politicians, civic actors, all who influence political and governance processes. The information shared amongst themselves on social media platforms ultimately shapes the opinions and perception of the broader mass population and in turn shapes the manner in which traditional media houses cover the news.

Media today as we know has significantly changed from what traditionally was the practice, with social media dramatically shaping the way news is consumed, distributed and reported. The trend in Uganda especially among the youth, the elite, and urban dwellers who are the majority social media users, is increasingly turning

away from traditional media houses to social media sites for news updates consequently allowing users to share news stories, images or videos, and to discuss a news issue or event.

In addition to sharing news on social media, a small number are also covering the news themselves, by posting photos or videos of news events. This practice has played a role in a number of recent breaking news events, including the burning of the Kasubi Tombs in 2010, the leaking of private conversations of the Inspector General of Police on tape and leaking of a fake cabinet list, accusations of dismissal of the Minister for the Presidency, as well as other major media events. In the context of the campaigns for the 2016 elections social media have been key instruments for breaking news and spreading all kinds of messages.

Whereas government has been paying more attention to regulating traditional media and attempting to control it, there is no answer yet to the question of whether and how online and social media networks should be regulated. During the conference in July 2015 it was agreed that the spread of falsehoods and rumours, "trolling" and "cyber-bullying", defamation and disrespect for personal privacy, are serious challenges in the open space of social media. At the same time, attempts of regulation bring about fears of censorship.

#### Social Media and the News

Traditional media players are yet to fully recognize social media information as "news". While it remains debatable whether digital technology has weakened or strengthened journalism, what is for sure is that social media has shaken up the media business model and ushered it into a new age – one where journalists are not simply responsible for storytelling but also engaging with their audiences through social media, blog posts and other mediums.

The biggest change impacting the industry today is how consumers are getting their news. Outside newspapers or desktop news, consumers are looking to their mobile devices for the latest updates. Reporters are now encouraged to become more entrepreneurial in how they make their stories available, whether it be through their Twitter account or podcasts. Considerations are being made with the knowledge that news consumers on social media have a limited

attention span because news content now competes for attention with other non-news-related content. An issue that could easily tempt reporters into dramatizing their news content in an effort to compete for attention with other social media content.

So what does the future hold for journalism? Almost unanimously, most social media users will boldly agree that breaking news, often considered the bread and butter of news outlets, is struggling and being replaced by social media channels. While it is true that Twitter and other social media sites have disrupted the way news breaks, it has also been argued that information that "breaks" on social media sites is often still not considered "news" by the general public until mainstream media confirms it through valid sources.

On the one hand the spread of social media platforms provides an opportunity for enhanced access to information and a diversification of sources and opinions. Social media have greatly advanced the possibilities of "citizen journalism". They provide channels for everyone to reach out to the public, to share information and to express opinions without formal requirements and with a minimum interference in form of regulation and censorship.

On the other hand, the "unfiltered" spread of information and opinions through social media also comes with a number of risks and downsides. Contributions on social media platforms are mostly not subject to journalistic standards and ethics. Due to the lack of regulations and standards, abuse in forms of spreading false information and rumours, defamation and hate speech can hardly be prevented. At the same time the increase in the quantity of information does not say anything about the quality of available information. In this context, the role of traditional media and professional journalists in analysing, filtering and explaining information needs to be emphasised.

Going by the concept that one of the principal effects that media houses have on governance is their ability to provide information relevant in the voting booth, social media's undoubted influence in shaping the standards, opinions and perceptions of the people – especially the middle class and urban elite - must be considered in shaping governance.

#### Civic-State Engagement through Social Media

On the civil society front, social media has somewhat become the new platform for civic activism. From around the world there are reported events where political changes have taken place as a result of so-called "social media revolutions", such as during the events of what has been dubbed the "Arab Spring". While social media networks were instrumental in driving and facilitating such "leaderless" revolutions they did not facilitate the formulation of constructive solutions for the way forward and for the management of the post-revolution conditions.

However, social media is also a space civil society can use to engage in a constructive conversation in rallying citizens into action. Social media can help citizens to get connected, exchange views and ideas, form networks and plan for joint action. One could argue that through fast internet and social media networks a "digital civil society" has emerged. Successful social media campaigns have in the past years helped lift otherwise overlooked topics to the public agenda and to mobilise support and resources. But at the same time it has also been observed that social media engagement does not necessarily translate into concrete civic action. Most users appear to be rather passive consumers who do not move beyond the "liking and sharing" of social media content.

For citizens to make meaningful use of the positive potential of social media for civic engagement a minimum level of critical understanding and skills is required. People need to be strengthened in their social media literacy. At the same time, civil society organisations need to improve their social media strategies in order to exploit the opportunities and avoid some of the pitfalls.

Social media also provide opportunities for political leaders to strengthen their interaction with the citizens. State and government institutions can for instance use online platforms to disseminate information and to solicit citizens' input.

Political communication has taken a new direction with the emergence of social media. Political parties and candidates can use social media to reach out to the public and to market themselves and their ideas – not just during campaign periods. So far, it can

be observed that many stakeholders in the political sphere are not making full use of these opportunities.

#### **Opportunities and Challenges**

In his keynote address at the KAS Social Media Conference 2015 Dr. William Tayeebwa, Head of the Department of Journalism and Communication at Makerere University, highlighted a number of opportunities associated with the use of new media technologies, particularly social media:

- 1. Social media can improve accessibility as it allows citizens to reach out to political leaders through different channels.
- 2. Social media can facilitate the dissemination of information for decision-making and the transfer of knowledge to the citizens.
- 3. Social media can provide platforms for discussion of pertinent issues between citizens and their leaders and among the citizens themselves.
- 4. Social media can facilitate effective networking among the citizens and the creation of different forms of organisations and communities.
- 5. Social media can provide avenues for more participatory, inclusive and deliberative processes of decision-making.
- 6. Social media can mobilise citizens around a cause and can spur social-political action.

At the same time Dr. Tayeebwa also highlighted some of the challenges associated with social media in the context of the theme of the conference:

- 1. Accessibility may be impeded by a number of barriers such as poor infrastructure, poor literacy, cultural apprehension to new technologies, or profit interests.
- 2. There appears to be a generational gap, with the younger generation making much more use of the opportunities of the internet and social media.

- 3. Some observers see a tendency of the state to try to monitor, regulate or even block social media in a way that may threaten the freedom of expression online.
- 4. Social media has increasingly become a channel for different forms of offenses and so-called "cyber-crime" - such as "cyber-bullying", stalking, defamation, spread of false information and inciting messages.
- 5. Social media increase the trend of "information overload" which makes it harder to filter out relevant and useful information and can lead to "social fragmentation" and "digital isolation".

The question of how the opportunities can be fully exploited while at the same time effectively addressing the challenges will need to be high on the agenda for further discussion. In discussing this question, we shall continue to look at the role of and expectations towards the different key stakeholders - media professionals, businesses in ICT and media, state institutions and political actors, as well as civil society organisations.

#### **Reality Check Volume 8**

In order to provide further stimuli for the ongoing discussion, this eighth edition of the KAS publication series "Reality Check" focusses on the topic of the Social Media Conference: "Assessing the Impact of Social Media on Political Communication and Civic Engagement". The experts who contributed to the publication address the topic from a number of different angles.

**Dr. William Tayeebwa** assesses the impact social media has on traditional journalism and the resulting opportunities and challenges for media houses in Uganda.

**Mathias Kamp, Maike Messerschmidt and Ivan Rugambwa** look at the role social media have so far played in the run up to the 2016 elections in Uganda, highlighting a number of critical incidences and general trends.

With a similar perspective, **Yusuf Kiranda, Michael Mugisha** and **Donnas Ojok** discuss in more detail the contribution of social

media towards enhancing political communication and campaigning in Uganda and suggest ways of harnessing the "emancipatory potential" of social media.

One of Uganda's most popular political bloggers, **Ruth Aine**, in her contribution addresses a wide range of questions on how social media usage affects political and social communication. Her study looks at the different stakeholders in politics, media and civil society.

**Ahmed Hadji** takes up the perspective of NGOs and civil society organisations. He explores the opportunities social media offer for civil society networking, activism and civic engagement.

#### **IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON** TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM: **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES** FOR MEDIA HOUSES IN UGANDA

Dr. William Tayeebwa<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

The emergence of social media platforms, notably Twitter and Facebook, has presented several opportunities to conventional/ traditional journalism, such as improved access to online resources and the sharing of information, despite professional impediments such as the instantaneous dissemination of unsubstantiated information that may turn out to be outright false or defamatory. Conscientious journalism institutions have exploited the opportunities that social media offer by creating online platforms to source news but also as distribution channels. Such media houses harness the potential of social media while aware of the pitfalls by, for instance, instituting mechanisms for the verification of unsubstantiated claims made via social media. Those media houses inform their readership that news items disseminated via social media are still under scrutiny and ought not be taken as complete. It would be unethical on the part of traditional media institutions not to disclose to their audiences the incompleteness of information received via social media. The credibility of such media institutions, if established to disseminate falsehoods in the heat of scoops, would suffer.

#### The social media phenomenon

The concept of 'social media' can best be appreciated within the framework of what Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells called the 'network society' (1996). In his trilogy entitled the *The Information* Age, Castells explains in detail how, because of the Internet and the World Wide Web, information had in the early 1990s become a raw material. He details how the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) was impacting on every aspect of life. He argues that the key characteristic of the 'information age' was that time and space collapsed, whereby activities that used

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to take days or weeks took hours and transactions across oceans started happening almost instantaneously in cyberspace.

For journalism, the information age heralded the emergence of new media technologies, which de-centred the very act of communicating by widening the spaces for engagement with audiences and participation by them in mediated discourse (Hassan and Thomas, 2006). Such new media technologies have come to be generically referred to as 'social media' because of their ability to permit instantaneous human interactions and inter-connectivity across space and time (Stein, 2006; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Breuer, 2011).

The other commonly used term for 'social media' is 'social networking sites', which, according to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) are 'applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other' (p.63).

Citing several authors, Sarah (2012) differentiates 'social media' platforms, otherwise referred to as 'Web 2.0', as those that allow for interactive participation by users, as contrasted with 'Web 1.0' platforms that simply provide content to users without giving them the opportunity to interact with or modify the information online (p.146).

She notes that the key characteristics of 'social media' technologies are the ability to be on publicly accessible online sites that entail a minimum amount of creative effort, and that are created outside of professional routines and practices (ibid.). Anena (2014:12-13) reviews literature and discerns other defining features of 'social media' as being flexibility, convergence, immediacy (real-time feedback), permanence and easy usability.

Scholars, notably Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 62-64), classify social media into six different types, which are: collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia); blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter); content communities (e.g. YouTube); social networking sites (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, LinkedIn, Tumblr); virtual game world (e.g. World of Warcraft); and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life).

The Government of Uganda's Social Media Guide defines social media as being 'a set of online technologies, sites and practices which are used to share opinions, experiences and perspectives' (NITA-U, 2013:4).

#### Social media and journalism

The emergence of social media has made it possible for anyone with access to technologies, such as a smartphone and/or any mediated technology to gather, process and disseminate information to others (Langlois, 2011). In the electronic media world, anyone with such facilities can make their own broadcasts, thus doing the work of conventional journalists (Bubuli, 2014). In his work, Bubuli (2014:6) notes how social media sites rival traditional media such as newspapers and television as sources of news and information. On his part, Abdelhay (2012) argues that the role of traditional journalists has in recent years diminished because of the emergence of citizen journalism as afforded by new technologies.

Naughton (2013) notes the increasing power of Twitter as a newssharing outlet, observing that it had become 'the de facto newswire for the planet.' Other scholars such as Kirkpatrick (2010) point out the increasing role of social networking sites, notably Facebook, in sourcing and disseminating journalism content. And yet, scholars such as Meyers et al. (2012) remain sceptical, arguing that reports produced by citizen journalists lack the rigour afforded by professional journalists.

#### The enduring enterprise of conventional journalism

With or without social media, traditional or conventional journalism must remain the practice of gathering, processing and distributing news and information through various mass media channels and formats based on established and sacrosanct norms such as balance and fairness, truthfulness and accuracy, objectivity and impartiality, neutrality and detachment (Mencher, 2007; Rich, 2009). It is a practice that is grounded in the ability and passion of individuals to recount stories that have an impact on the wellbeing of society, which is their social responsibility role(Meyers at al., 2012). It is a calling to adhere to ethical principles as defined by media houses in codes of conduct so as to safeguard the interests of the public. In their conventional sense, journalists adhere to routines in newsrooms whereby the reporters as first chroniclers of events submit to the authority of editors, who sieve the content based on the above stated values.

#### Intrinsic challenges of journalism

Far from the phenomenon of social media, the inherent challenges that conventional journalism faces are numerous and they ought to be appreciated. Foremost, the practice is grounded in a human right enshrined in, for instance, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that 'everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.' Conversely, Article 29 of the Ugandan constitution re-echoes the same human right: '(1) Every person shall have the right to (a) freedom of speech and expression which shall include freedom of the press and other media.' The right to disseminate information in these conventions is held by 'everyone' and not exclusively by journalists, which has exacerbated the phenomenon of 'citizen journalists'.

Besides, unlike, for instance, in law or medicine, the practical skills of gathering, processing and disseminating information that are required of a reporter can be acquired on the job without any formal journalism training (Meyers at al., 2012). In order to become a lawyer, one must after the first degree acquire a certificate of legal practice from an institution, such as Uganda's Law Development Centre. For one to be a medical doctor, one attends five years of medical school and one year of medical internship. All these require a very technical and exclusive body of knowledge and the barrier to entry to the course is very stringent. To compound the training problem, Wiik (2009) points out what he calls a 'sociological impediment' whereby journalism finds itself at the intersection of all disciplines such as political science, economics, health, agriculture etc. Often, the best people to report on such issues are those schooled in those disciplines. This raises the challenge of what Wiik (2009) calls 'homogenisation versus fragmentation' in the field. For most newsrooms, these kinds of professionals tend to become more cost-effective; thus raising the issue of whether the many years in journalism school are worth it! The emergence of blogs where experts, not necessarily journalists, discuss specialised topics such

as health and science has exacerbated the 'sociological impediment' for most journalists.

When it comes to the practice, Aldridge and Evetts (2003) as well as Wiik (2009) point to the fact that journalistic codes are often ambiguous and open to varied interpretations. Often, journalists themselves do not agree on what principles such as fairness, objectivity, balance and others in effect mean. While all the medical doctors swear to uphold the same Hippocratic oath, and lawyers uphold the same bar oath, each media house tends to adapt journalism principles to rhyme with their in-house policies and philosophies. Such lack of a uniform philosophy exacerbates the phenomenon of citizen journalists who tell good stories without necessarily adhering to any enforceable ethical imperatives.

Meyers et al. (2012) as well as Singer (2003) point out the challenge of professionalising journalism due to a fluid command structure in the trade. In the traditional professions of medicine and law, it is very clear who is answerable for their actions. A wrong treatment regimen will be directly linked to the medical professional who prescribed the treatment; in the same manner, a bad lawyer who sends an innocent person to death row will face sanctions. In the case of journalists, the structure is too fluid, i.e. journalists will blame sub-editors for messing up their story, while the subs will blame the editors, who will in turn blame the advertising department, who will in turn blame the management policies that are tied to government or business imperatives. Such fluidity leaves loopholes for misconduct, especially as afforded by nebulous social media frameworks.

#### Specific challenges of social media to journalism

Whereas there are mechanisms for traditional journalism to gatekeep the content for distribution, the instantaneous nature of sharing information as accorded by social media makes it harder to exercise the requisite quality controls. In the competitive moments between media houses, it is easier for false and defamatory information to be disseminated via social media platforms. At the extreme, social media has been cited in cyber-crime (stalking, hacking, cyberbullying and cyber-terrorism). Mundhai et al. (2009: 11) have cited the use of SMS (Short Messaging Service) as a platform to distribute ethnic hatred messages in Kenya during and after the violent 2007 general elections. Nonetheless, most journalism codes of ethics on social media echo what the Government of Uganda Social Media Guide stipulates: 'Ensure that the materials to be posted on a Social Media site is not fraudulent, harassing, threatening, bullying, embarrassing, sexually explicit, profane, obscene, racist, intimidating, defamatory or otherwise inappropriate or unlawful' (NITA-U, 2013: 10).

The issue of lack of training in journalism or skilled individuals to process information for distribution online is compounded with the low literacy levels of audiences. For instance, Unwin (2012:4) notes how the divide between the information-rich and the information-poor becomes wider between richer individuals and countries that are able to access ever-faster Internet, thus enabling them to use ever creative social media. Such differences in access to social media apply 'not only between countries, but also between urban and rural areas, between those who have more disabilities and those who have fewer, and very often between men and women' (ibid.). Such cyber-illiteracy across the board disadvantages the journalism enterprise.

With regard to government, the nebulous nature of new media technologies has exacerbated the stance on surveillance and censorship. Whereas laws such as the Regulation of Interception of Communications Act (2010) and the Uganda Communications Act of 2000 (Cap 106) are already in place, there is also in the offing a specific law to regulate social media usage (Anena, 2014: 40). Such laws notwithstanding, there have been specific efforts by government functionaries to block social media. For instance, when a consortium of the political opposition known as 'Activists for Change (A4C)' launched a campaign of walking from their homes to their workplaces (walk-to-work) to shine a spotlight on poor governance as manifest in the rising cost of consumer goods in the country in early 2011, the armed forces were deployed to stop the exercise, thus leading to violent confrontations with the protesters (BBC news, 2011). The actions of the armed forces were disseminated worldwide on social media, which prompted the Acting Executive Director of the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), Quinto Ojok, to write to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) thus: 'You are therefore requested to block the use of Facebook and Twitter for 24 hours as of now: that is 14th April 2011 at 3.30pm to eliminate the connection and sharing of information that incites the public' (UCC/

OED/073/01). Such regulatory mechanisms slacken journalism's vivacity.

#### Opportunities of social media to journalism

Despite the many challenges cited above, both inherent to the profession and accorded by the emergence of social media, Unwin (2012) points to the freedoms that new media technologies offer for people to communicate across spaces and times, a phenomenon he refers to as the 'space-time liberty' (p.3). Such freedoms are more limited using traditional mass media. He also points to developments in mobile telephony with Internet capabilities that make it possible for ordinary citizens to share information and news that was previously a preserve of journalists, what he refers to as the 'access liberty' (ibid.) Such freedom accorded by 'interactive information technologies' makes it possible for citizens to access their leaders easily to express their opinions and judgements across the social-political spectrum (Mudhai et al., 2009: 9). For instance, Bubuli (2014) points out that social media have given people an opportunity to express views and opinions that are often ignored by mainstream media (p.1). Citing the example of Uganda, he points out how telecommunications service providers such as Mobile Telecommunications Network (MTN) and Africell provide free access to Facebook Zero (p.2). Journalists and their respective media houses in Uganda have not let the 'access liberty' accorded though the 'space-time liberty' pass them. They have Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and other social networking sites to source news content, but also connect with their audiences.

Just like traditional journalism channels, social media can be excellent avenues for dissemination of credible and useful information for decision-making as well as excellent for imparting knowledge and skills to the citizenry (Mudhai et al., 2009: 10). The challenge remains to ensure that credible information is provided through social media as in traditional ones so that debate is not based on opinion rather than fact, or on prejudice rather than knowledge (ibid.). Media houses in Uganda and journalists must continue to play their roles of informing and educating their audiences using social media platforms.

One of the other main functions of the mass media is to provide a forum for discussion and debate. Mudhai et al. (2009) argue that social

media are excellent avenues to stimulate the discussion of pertinent issues such as governance and democracy between citizens and their leaders but, most especially, among citizens themselves (p.11). Social media offer opportunities to form new ways of networking and forming communities through online discussion boards or forums. Unwin (2012) discerns that new media technologies establish a new balance of distributional power of information through means of co-creation of content between 'peers', what he refers to as a 'sharing liberty' (p.3). An example is the Ugandan journalists' closed Facebook page where ideas for stories and other issues of interest are shared. The Government of Uganda Social Media Guide notes that 'the main benefit of social media for governments is that wellconsidered and carefully implemented social media can create greater transparency, an interactive relationship with the public, a stronger sense of ownership of government policy and services, and thus a greater public trust in government' (NITA-U, 2013:3). Mudhai et al. (2009: 13) argue that discussion and deliberation can only make sense if there are choices of courses of action to be made. They arque that deliberations facilitated by social media ought to be acted upon to spur social-political action. As Loader and Mercea (2012: x) have argued, it is plausible to assume that 'the widespread use of the Internet for social networking, blogging, video-sharing and tweeting has an elective affinity with participatory democracy'. Such opportunities, previously afforded only by traditional mass media, are now possible because of social media platforms.

Social media are also excellent avenues for socialisation and the enhancement of communal cohesion. While traditional mass media played such a role, access was limited to mainly the elite and, to a less extent, the youth or other marginalised groups. Using social networking sites, notably Facebook, otherwise marginalised groups are able to connect and socialise (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Related to the concept of socialisation is entertainment, whereby people share various formats of artistic expression such as music and videos for affective value.

#### Conclusion

Notwithstanding the inherent impediments to journalism practice, cyberspace, when harnessed well, offers many opportunities to journalists and citizens for far-reaching engagement. The impact

of social media on traditional journalism is not limited to an inward process of access to vast online resources but extends to an outward one of distributing news and other media content without the impediments of space and time. Successful media houses in Uganda ought not only to continue a process of retooling their journalists in the art of deploying more social media platforms, but should also engage in a process of teaching media literacy to their audiences to enable them to sieve online content.

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# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE RUN-UP TO THE 2016 ELECTIONS IN UGANDA

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#### Introduction

While in Uganda still only a relatively small percentage of the population has access to social media, its importance in political communication and activism cannot be overestimated. Due to the power that manifests itself in hashtags, posts, and images, the Ugandan political elites on the one hand learned to use social media for their political goals and campaigning. On the other hand, however, there are also calls for regulation as social media can be just as detrimental as it can be useful. This country report takes stock and analyses the impact social media has on the electoral process.

Like in many other countries, traditional media channels from print to radio, to TV and now online media outlets have for many years had unfettered dominance in influencing mass opinions and perceptions in Uganda. They were the make or break, the one-stop centers for information and shaping public discourse.

Not any more (or No longer). The arrival and spread of new media technologies (also known as social media) like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, among others, are fast altering this dominance over breaking news and discussing it. In June 2014, 8.5 million people had internet access, representing, however, only 24.4 percent of the population. As of June 2012, 562,000 Ugandans had Facebook accounts<sup>5</sup>. It is estimated that this number has grown threefold today, reaching around 1.5 million people out of the overall

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<sup>5</sup> http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm

population of 34.8 million people<sup>6</sup>. Many others have accounts on Google+, LinkedIn and on various messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Viber.

This surge in on-line engagement and interaction has been due to a number of factors. Although most internet users remain largely urban dwellers, ICT infrastructure has slowly but steadily permeated the countryside, and internet penetration now stands at a promising At last count, Ugandan internet users had clocked 11.9 million, according to the country's communication and ICT regulator, the Uganda Communications Commission7. Although this is still a relatively small number in comparison to the overall population of Uganda, it is counterbalanced by an impressive rate of access to and use of mobile phones that stands at over 70%, with about 19.5 million Ugandans now owning at least one mobile phone with the number of users of social media apps constantly growing. Here, many Ugandans comment on anything that crosses their path, with opinions as varied as their sources, connecting with strangers and making new friends as well as enemies, lauding heroes and vilifying villains.

An example of the power that users of social media platforms can develop is the case of a maid in her mid-20s who hit international headlines in 2014 for allegedly brutally beating a toddler. The video got more than a million views on YouTube and Facebook, with many condemning the maid's actions. As the public turned the story over and over, sharing it and demanding swift – and sometimes in-kind - action from law enforcement agencies, the police was forced to act, amending the charge sheet from torture to attempted murder and causing a situation that was condemned by some human rights lawyers and advocates for the rule of law and vigorously applauded by the masses on WhatsApp and Facebook.

#### Impacts on Politics and the Run-Up to the Elections 2016

As Uganda heads into the 2016 elections, politicians and law enforcement agencies have not been spared by the impact and force of social media either. Youth Affairs minister Ronald Kibuule was

http://www.ubos.org/onlinefiles/uploads/ubos/NPHC/NPHC%202014%20 PROVISIONAL%20RESULTS%20REPORT-.pdf

http://www.ucc.co.ug/files/downloads/Q1-Market%20Report%202015.pdf

the first to taste the music of social media activists, when he in September 2013 was forced to retract his remarks on indecently dressed ladies being undeserving of sympathy when raped - which caused a public outcry online even beyond the borders of Uganda.

When on June 10th 2015, Daniel Turitwenka alias Danny-T, a popular youth activist on Twitter and Facebook, was arrested by Police as he went to visit a friend in prison, his fellow tweeps (as those on twitter fondly refer to themselves), started a twitter campaign to have him released under the Hashtag, #FreeDanny. The campaign ran for two days, and Danny was released on the third.

Even the candidates for the presidential elections in 2016 are being influenced, but are also making use of social media platforms. On June 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 Uganda's former Prime Minister John Patrick Amama Mbabazi announced his bid to run for presidency via the social media channel YouTube. This was after alleged insider information was spread that state operatives had planned to block him from formally announcing his bid at a press conference.

Just a day later, President Yoweri Museveni, returning from an African Union summit in South Africa, would respond to Mbabazi's declaration via the same platform. The two hitherto close friends and confidentes, it emerges, also share a love for social media. Both are active tweeps with huge numbers of followers.

Mbabazi would follow up his declaration with an online press conference on July  $6^{\text{th}}$  2015 the first of its kind, to offer even non-journalists on social media an opportunity to ask him any questions. The question and answer session, running under the hashtag #AskAmama, was held at his home, and lasted for over 3 hours.

#### The "Heat" of the Campaigns in Social Media

With the official start of the campaign season the activities of the political parties, candidates and their supporters have intensified and the discussions have heated up. The camps of the three main candidates Museveni, Mbabazi and Besigye are trying to maximize the use of social media for mobilization and communication. Earlier in 2015 it had already been reported that State House was hiring social media savvy journalists in light of the upcoming campaigns.

The social media component of Mbabazi's "Go Forward" campaign is said to be the work of an international team of experts.

There is no clear consensus as to what extent the social media campaigns will make a difference for the actual election results. Some sceptical observers still consider social media to be a rather "elitist" tool for the privileged and educated urban population in Uganda. However, the spread of mobile internet through simple and cheap smartphones has greatly increased the penetration even in the rural areas. The use of Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp has spread far beyond the urban centres. And it should not be forgotten that the vast majority of Ugandan voters are young people - who are generally more open to modern technologies and social media.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the physical campaigning exercises across the country are accompanied by an immense number of posts and messages via social media. It seems as if producing pictures and videos of campaign crowds and sharing them online has become as important as reaching out to the people who are actually present at campaign events. Interestingly, some of these pictures have become subject to controversial discussions - often around accusations of creating false impressions of larger crowds by photoshopping pictures or putting them in a wrong context.

The intense activities on social media platforms may provide channels for quickly reaching out to the public, more specifically to supporters and potential voters. They allow for easy and instant updates on what is happening on the campaign trail. But at the same time they contribute rather little in terms of providing substantial information on the parties' and candidates' profiles, programmes and positions - which would be needed for the voters to make informed choices. Posts and messages on policy positions and political objectives are mostly overshadowed by discussions on which candidate is pulling the bigger crowds, personal attacks and ridicule, as well as all kinds of rumours and allegations of misconduct, manipulation and interference in the campaigns.

#### **Political Actors Embracing Social Media**

Indeed, the power of social media has been such that even hitherto conservative government departments and bureaucracies have had to adapt, and embrace the platforms as an important forum of communication with the citizens.

Julius Mucunguzi, communications advisor to the Prime Minister of Uganda, agrees. At a conference on the impact of social media on civic engagement and political communication organized by KAS Uganda and South Sudan, he stated that government spokespersons must "[...] listen, discuss and engage [...]" citizens online. "Communication online is no longer one-way", he says. "Engagement is key."

Indeed many government offices from Parliament to parastatals own social media accounts especially on Facebook and Twitter, and so do political parties. As of August 2015, the ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), had about 2.500 followers on its Twitter account, where it had posted 1.165 tweets. By January 2016, this had risen to more than 9.600 followers and 4.520 tweets. A similar picture emerges for the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), which by the beginning of January 2016 had about 5.300 followers and 2.550 tweets – as compared to 1.295 followers and 977 tweets in August 2015.

These figures show that with intensifying campaigns for the 2016 elections, the political parties have significantly extended their social media activities and the public seems also more receptive towards these efforts than it had been before the beginning of the campaigns. The political parties use the platforms constructively to engage party members and respond to any queries as swiftly as possible as well as to connect to the general public as a crucial part of campaigning. However, we can also see that the individual accounts of the Presidential candidates are much more prominent than the parties' accounts – making the latter almost look irrelevant. As of January 2016, two Presidential candidates were among the top ten Twitter profiles in Uganda. President Museveni (NRM) came in third position with about 180,000 followers, while candidate Amama

<sup>8</sup> More information about the conference under http://www.kas.de/uganda/en/publications/42116/ and http://www.kas.de/uganda/en/events/64479/

Mbabazi (Go Forward) was at seventh position with about 125,000 followers9.

But it has not been all rosy. As social media engagement has flourished, so have the calls for its regulation. Critics argue that because of its unregulated nature, social media had become a convenient conduit for the spread of all sorts of information without filter, complete distortions, and falsehoods. Rumours, defamation, and hate speech also reigned freely.

In April 2015, Minister for the Presidency, Frank Tumwebaze, paraded Habib Mboowa, a political activist, before the press during which the latter confessed that he had spread defamatory information on the Minister on social media. Mboowa confessed that he had been used by an aide to former Prime Minister Amama Mbabazi to post on Twitter and Facebook, among others, claims that the minister had been suspended and arrested<sup>10</sup>.

The rumours and ensuing debate had found its way to thousands of people's mobile handsets, compelling the Prime Minister, Dr Ruhakana Rugunda, and Security minister, Mukasa Muruli, to issue a statement and share on social media an exchange of correspondence that proved Mr Tumwebaze was on official leave and had not been removed from his position, as the rumors had stated.

A day later, a purported cabinet reshuffle made the rounds on social media, causing anxiety and excitement in equal measure amongst the Ugandan public, and keeping traditional media houses on tenterhooks just in case it would turn out to be legitimate - which, as official sources communicated, it wasn't. In a tweet, government spokesperson and Executive Director of the Uganda Media Centre, Ofwono Opondo, poured cold water on the speculations, noting: "President Museveni has not made any Cabinet reshuffle, ignore the purported list circulating on social media."

Apart from Facebook and Twitter, the mobile messaging platform WhatsApp has become increasingly popular in Uganda and indeed currently seems to be a fast and convenient channel for breaking

http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/twitter/profiles/uganda/

<sup>10</sup> http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Tumwebaze-parades-man-behind-his-Facebook-woes/-/688334/2613470/-/uxaasx/-/index.html

news and spreading messages among the politically interested and active Ugandans. But cases of abuse also made it into the headlines. In May 2015 President Museveni threatened to arrest social media users who "spread rumours" and "promote abusive and sectarian content". He was referring to a case of audio recordings widely shared on WhatsApp which were perceived to be ridiculing certain ethnic groups and thereby spreading sectarian hatred.

#### Calls for Regulation

As can be seen from the examples above, the government has good reason for growing unease with social media in general. Just four years earlier, the same platforms were used by citizens in North Africa to rally and mobilise citizens, igniting and fuelling what came to be known as the Arab spring. At least four long serving leaders were overthrown in the ensuing aftermath. While so far social media in Uganda has been used mostly to spread irritation and confusion about what is going on within the ruling party and the government, the fear is that it could also be used to mobilise for large scale protest and demonstrations.

One such site that the government has grown genuinely weary of and is trying to get a hold of desperately, is Tom Voltaire Okwalinga's Facebook page, a masked yet enigmatic personality, famous for his politically charged and explosive revelations on the "behind the scenes" of political power. Recently, Ugandan security personnel have requested Facebook to reveal the true identity of the online activist – a request which Facebook declined<sup>11</sup>. In May 2015, an information and security analyst was arrested and charged with "offensive communication" according to the Computer Misuse Act of 2011<sup>12</sup>. However, even during the time he spent in prison, the Facebook page remained active and left the security agencies quessing.

The above mentioned Act is the only law that has the goal to specifically "prevent unlawful access, abuse or misuse of information systems including computers"<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> http://www.observer.ug/news-headlines/38278-who-s-tom-voltaire-okwalingatvo

<sup>12</sup> http://chapterfouruganda.com/sites/default/files/downloads/Computer-Misuse-Act-2011\_0.pdf, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: p. 3.

It includes the above mentioned "offensive communication", which refers to electronic communication that is wilfully and repeatedly used to disturb the peace in the country or the right to privacy of any person. Other offences covered in this Act include cyber harassment and stalking, child pornography, and electronic fraud. With this legislation, Uganda has made rather progressive steps in areas like cyber bullying or stalking than many other countries.

Besides this Act, government is yet to enact a substantive law regulating social media usage. However, calls for the regulation of social media are getting louder and are inspired by very different sources. The three issues which keep popping up in the Ugandan media and which are presented as good reasons to censor and regulate social media are pornography, sexual abuse, and terrorism<sup>14</sup>. In reference to the former, Simon Lokodo, Minister for Ethics and Integrity, warned: "We are going to censor every production that you are going to show on your media facility. We shall go the Ethiopian way and stop all broadcasting houses from enjoying that freedom and supply all information through government media facilities"15. Not included in the debates is usually the fact that Uganda has already passed comprehensive legislation on all these issues, such as the Anti-Pornography Act 2014, the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2002 and the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Bill of 2015, above mentioned Computer Misuse Act, as well as several Acts covering sexual abuse and rape. This leaves the question open: What is a substantive law on social media use going to cover and regulate?

In June 2015, a cybercrime unit was established that is supposed to deal with all offences outlined in the Computer Misuse Act. What leaves observers wondering, however, is the timing of the creation of this unit, since already in 2013 the Computer Emergency Response Team was created with the same purpose. However, the newly created cybercrime unit is also going to handle less clearly

<sup>14</sup> http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/7-girls-raped-via-Facebookin-one-month/-/688334/2898628/-/70wt64z/-/index.html, http:// www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Government-close-media-outletspornography/-/688334/2627430/-/y08wl4/-/index.html, http://acme-ug. org/2015/07/13/hunting-down-social-media-abusers-in-uganda-as-elections-

<sup>15</sup> http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Government-close-media-outletspornography/-/688334/2627430/-/y08wl4/-/index.html

defined crimes on social media which were described as "the misuse of cyberspace inciting hatred and sectarianism"<sup>16</sup>.

Now, government is working on new restrictions to come up with a substantive law, to regulate the use of social media. The Uganda Police have already set up a specialized social media monitoring unit. At the above mentioned KAS Social Media Conference, the Acting Director for Broadcasting at the Uganda Communications Commission, Fred Otunnu, noted that some social media accounts like Facebook and YouTube allowed "undesirable content which is not good for our people" and that "regulation must be enforced". However, he also emphasised that there was no intention "to provide for any regulatory framework that guards or curtails, but rather that facilitates the proper usage of social media platforms".

All of these developments keep the Ugandan social media users on their toes as wide reaching censorship and regulations might soon be drafted and implemented. This would considerably limit the space social media has created – not only in the private sphere but also in terms of political communication and activism.

The regulation of social media is a delicate balancing act. On the one hand many Ugandans support the clamp down on ethnic hatred, defamation and diverse forms of cybercrime, as well as the protection of individual privacy which is often infringed upon on social media platforms. On the other hand, there are fears that freedom of expression might generally suffer as "collateral damage" and that regulatory frameworks could be used against political opponents. Thus, the relevant stakeholders will need to find the right balance between the protection of national unity and stability, the individual right to privacy, and the freedom of expression and open access to the internet as a right for everyone.

#### Way Forward

Some analysts argue that this pronounced push for regulation from the government portends great danger for the new media. While they acknowledge the vulnerability of social media to abuse, many fear that attempts by the government to regulate its usage could

<sup>16</sup> http://acme-ug.org/2015/07/13/hunting-down-social-media-abusers-in-uganda-as-elections-near/

muzzle free speech and expression, liberties that are enshrined in the country's constitution.

Others attribute government's obsession with regulation of social media to a 'fear' of its influence, especially as the country heads into the 2016 elections. Moreover, studies show most government officials are rather wanting as regards embracing and engaging the citizenry on social media. For example, of the 375 members of Parliament, only 79 own twitter accounts, and of those, less than half are active, according to Parliament Watch, an organization monitoring the performance of the Ugandan Parliament.

Other government administrative units are doing even worse. During KAS Uganda's Social Media Conference, it was revealed that most districts have websites, but barely use them. Julius Mucunguzi noted that some of the local politicians lacked knowledge on the use of online media platforms. "There are many organisations who say 'we want a website' but they don't know why they need it. You can't hand over a website to a district chairperson who doesn't have an email account," he said.

Many therefore view the recent attempts at regulation as a way through which government is trying to save face. Yet as the country readies itself for the coming polls and plunges itself in campaign mood, the importance of social media cannot be overstated. Because of its connecting power, social media has the capacity to propel otherwise overlooked topics to the public agenda, and to mobilise citizens into acting on a particular issue.

Although it has been accused in some circles of failing to translate online engagement into concrete civic action, social media remains an important channel of advancing critical issues to be addressed in an often endless and sometimes frustrating bureaucracy amid limited space for constructive political and civic engagement like in Uganda.

# SOCIAL MEDIA, POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND CAMPAIGNING IN UGANDA: OPPORTUNITY OR CHALLENGE?

Yusuf Kiranda, 17 Michael Mugisha 18 and Donnas Ojok 19

#### Abstract

This article discusses the contribution of social media platforms such as microblogs (e.g. Twitter) and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) towards enhancing political communication and campaigning in Uganda. The article examines whether deliberations based on social media have fostered meaningful political dialogue that influences decision-making in political parties and government. Our findings suggest that social media is neither good nor bad for political communication. Its ability to shape political communication in an effective manner depends on contextual variables that include but are not limited to the availability of an inclusive supporting infrastructure, the existence of a technologically savvy society, and organisational capability to meaningfully coordinate the use of social media to a desired end. In Uganda, the main constraint on the effective use of social media in political communication remains limited access and weak organisational capability. As a result, political agents and organisations have resorted to using social media platforms mostly for self-promotion and less for deliberations on policy positions and contentious political issues. Thus, increasing citizen use of social media to express political opinions and interests has not met corresponding programmatic responses by decisionmakers. The article concludes by suggesting ways in which the emancipatory potential of social media can be harnessed to enhance the chances for politicians to reach out to citizens and for citizens to influence decisions pursued by political leaders.

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#### 1. Introduction

Until recently, politicians and political organisations expressed considerable disquiet about the cost of mass communication in Uganda. Participants in a 2015 social media conference organised by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) observed that print and broadcast media houses which, until a few years ago, existed as the only channels for mass communication were considerably expensive.<sup>20</sup> Reference was made to the high financial costs incurred to run sponsored messages or adverts as well as the transaction costs of preparing and disseminating information through traditional media; for example, the demanding process of organising and coordinating a press conference. It was, furthermore, noted that traditional media platforms presented limited and inaccessible avenues for citizen engagement, making political communication a one-way process, and consequently rendering incomplete the notion of democracy as a deliberative process.

Thus, the eventual consensus from the conference posited that in the context of political communication, social media platforms have greatly contributed to overcoming most of the observed limitations of traditional media. It was particularly noted that social media have provided channels for freely and speedily sharing information with the public as well as for getting citizen feedback on political and policy issues with minimal transaction costs. Such a development is viewed to not only enable politicians to communicate with citizens; it is also underpinned by the expectation that citizen views as expressed through social media informs the decisions taken by leaders in government and political parties, where social media again provides the platform through which such decisions are communicated and continuously debated.

Views from the above-mentioned KAS conference find support in dominant anecdotal literature as well as research that draws mostly on the experiences of developed countries (e.g. Stieglitz & Dang, 2013), which has directed tremendous praise at social media platforms for fostering communication by political leaders and institutions. However, such generalising perceptions of social

<sup>20</sup> The conference was hosted by KAS and partners on 12 July 2015. It brought together leading experts in media, communications, politics and civil society. The authors took part in the conference from which key conclusions were noted for the purpose of this paper.

media's role may not necessarily be reflective of the context in emerging economies and nascent democracies like Uganda.

Typically, emerging economies suffer variegated challenges, including the unavailability of a functional internet infrastructure which, in turn, breeds prohibitively high costs of access to webenabled applications such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Furthermore, within the democratic discourse itself, the existence of deliberative decision-making processes as a political culture remains a mostly questionable phenomenon in nascent democracies. Embryonic questions from such a challenged context include: to what extent political leaders and organisations use and rely on social media as a tool for communicating policy and programmatic suggestions; the extent to which political dialogue on social media involves a considerable number of citizens; whether the citizens use social media to offer political feedback, define their interests and express their opinions on public policies and political issues; and the extent to which citizen interests as expressed via social media receive corresponding response from duty-bearers in government and political parties.

The purpose of this article is to examine the extent to which social media platforms such as micro-blogs (e.g. Twitter) and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) have contributed towards fostering political communication and deliberative democracy in Uganda. Beyond the tendency to focus on the increasing intensity of political exchanges on social media, this paper explores the question of whether deliberations based on social media have fostered meaningful political communication in which citizen views influence the positions and policies pursued by political leaders. In this regard, the paper draws on Creighton's (2005)<sup>21</sup> definition of meaningful participation as the 'the process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision-making.'

This paper advances the view that the extent to which social media can serve as a tool for effective political communication is contingent on three critical factors: access (where it is accessible to a considerable number of citizens); utilisation (where social media

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Stieglitz & Dang, 2013.

are used by political leaders and citizens to hold meaningful political conversations); and the existence of a deliberative democratic culture within the political system. Our proposition builds on examples of some of the widely praised political campaigns aided by social media (e.g. Obama's election campaign in 2008). Thus, while the analysis presented in this paper considers the intensity of political conversations appearing on social media, our reality check focuses on the level of citizen access, and whether participatory dialogue is taking place between citizens and political leaders.

The paper begins by presenting an analytical framework, following which the application of social media by political leaders, political parties, government and citizens in Uganda is reviewed. This is followed by a conclusion, which also suggests alternatives for fostering the emancipatory potential of social media in political communication.

## 2. Social media and political communication: An analytical overview

This paper takes the definition of social media as 'a group of internetbased applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content, '22 Dominant examples include Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Studies that draw mostly on the experiences of developed countries have suggested that social media have become an important political communication channel, which enables political institutions and voters to directly interact with each other.<sup>23</sup>

In this regard, it is suggested that political activities might gain more transparency while citizens, on the other hand, might be more involved in political decision-making processes.<sup>24</sup> Indeed studies that have been conducted elsewhere in Africa (such as Egypt and Tunisia) have confirmed the view that the internet and mobile phone (which are key tools used in social media communications)

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) cited in Stieglitz & Dang (2013). When web 1.0 transitioned to web 2.0, also known as internet of the users, Mihai Horia Bădău (2011, p. 25), termed it as liberation from the 'tyranny of technology'. This new model of mass communication, characterised by a high degree of participation and interaction between users, has been widely praised for transforming and influencing political communication.

<sup>23</sup> Stieglitz & Dang (2013).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

have become part of the new fundamental information infrastructure for political conversation.<sup>25</sup>

As a result, the rise of social media has provoked renewed debates on the role of mass media generally, and social media in particular, in political communication. One strand of literature argues that 'the rise of the internet coincided with less participation and growing dissatisfaction with representative democracy'. 26 In this context, the internet is perceived as a 'magic bullet' that would catapult citizen participation and hence legitimise the representative democratic system.<sup>27</sup>Another view is a little pessimistic: it projects little influence of the internet platforms on political communication and instead argues that it is basically offline structures of political, economic and other sources of power that often tend to be mirrored online – the so-called normalisation hypothesis.<sup>28</sup> Therefore social media can thus be viewed as capable of overcoming coordination problems inherent with political mobilisation work because of its capability to creating broader networks managing larger groups of people of varying interests. But does social media exhibit similar effect on political communication in all contexts? What are the preconditions for successful use of social media as a tool of political communication?

This paper takes a more neutralist approach and builds on Klinger and Svensson's (2014) theory to argue that the internet-based social platforms can be seen either as a solution to 'all the problems liberal democracies face, or as merely reinforcing the existing political practices and power balances.' Conceiving social platforms as the rise of a network of 'media logic' quite distinct, but often overlapping with, traditional mass media, its effects on political communication can neither be perceived necessarily as bad or good but rather as dependent on the underlying contextual variables.<sup>29</sup> These include:

## 2.1 Supporting Infrastructure

In contrast to traditional media whose distribution and utilisation channels that largely rely on a mass media logic, social media

<sup>25</sup> Howard & Parks (2012).

howard a rain (2012).

Dahlgren 2009:159 cited inKlinger & Svensson (2014).

Stromer-Galley (2000).

see Lilleker et al. (2011).

<sup>29</sup> Feenberg (2010:17-18); Miller (2011); Street (1997:34).

platforms are 'constructed on a logic of networked distribution and users'.30 Media logic has been defined as 'the assumptions and processes for constructing messages within a particular medium.'31 The nature of social media therefore demands existence of supporting infrastructure in form of internet to enable the creation and growth of network in which communication and participation is embedded. Farrell & Drezner (2008: 27) however suggest that under social media platforms, production of content and media usage are often interlinked. This implies that an increasing part of information that citizens consume through 'mediated channels is the result of amateur activity, by those who may have authentic knowledge and information access, but lack expertise and resources'.32

Social media platforms therefore facilitates such 'lay participation' and the making of news that comes from outside the mass media. In other words, where mass media logic is based on professional content production, network media logic is based on amateur production and so-called 'produsage'.33 However, mass media logic and network media logic sometimes overlap in the production process; journalist bloggers, for example, tend to 'normalise' blogs by 'sticking to their traditional gatekeeper role'34 while at the same time moving away from non-partisan presentation of information.

However, in many developing countries, such as Uganda, the coverage of social media platforms remains largely an urbanbased phenomenon, again mostly concentrated among the youth. With just about 23 per cent out of the total 37 million of Uganda's population estimated<sup>35</sup> to live in urban areas, the largest proportion of the population live in rural areas, with not much infrastructure to support their inclusion on social media platforms. In addition, about 40 per cent of the rural population are illiterate<sup>36</sup> and thus have little or no ability to meet the technological demands of social media platforms.

<sup>30</sup> Klinger and Svensson's (2014)

<sup>31</sup> Altheide (2004: 294).

<sup>32</sup> Farrell & Drezner (2008: 27).

<sup>33</sup> Bruns (2008).

<sup>34</sup> Singer (2005: 192).

<sup>35</sup> UBOS (2014).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

# 2.2 Logic of distribution and its attendant demands like technology savviness

Social media platforms have also fundamentally altered the way information is disseminated, which introduces a new logic of distribution.<sup>37</sup> It is not only professionals, such as journalists or other central gatekeepers that can filter, edit and forward information anymore to their recipients, but also users themselves forming nodes in information networks.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, experts have developed empirical measures for ascertaining the distribution of content across various social media platforms. Bandari *et al.* (2012), for example have developed a criterion to forecast the popularity of news on Twitter, and found that traditionally prominent news sources differ from news sources that are popular on social media platforms.

However, there are claims that distribution on social media platforms is driven mainly by the logic of virality, which can be defined as 'network-enhanced word of mouth' or 'the process which gives any information item the maximum exposure, relative to the potential audience, over a short duration, distributed by many nodes'.<sup>39</sup>

This overlapping distribution of content enabled by social media however presupposes that the users are technologically savvy, a condition that potentially raises questions about the possibility of using social media as an effective tool of political communication in the context of developing countries like Uganda. From context, we can see that while professionals working for traditional mass media usually know that their publications will reach a certain number of subscribers or viewers/listeners (with very precise estimates of this number), the same publications have to first be found on social media platforms and thereafter distributed by and among networks of peers and like-minded users.

Thus, information is no longer simply delivered from the sender to the recipient, but has to be distributed from user to user, like a chain letter. Therefore we cannot talk about 'audiences' or subscribers in the traditional sense in relation to social media platforms, but instead we talk about users participating in networks of like-minded

<sup>37</sup> Klinger and Svensson's (2014).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Nahon et al. (2011:1).

others; often those with the wherewithal to engage consistently on social media platforms.<sup>40</sup>

Even in the presence of technologically savvy community or network of users, it is crucial to note that distribution of content on social media is often asymmetric. In other words, only very little information or few posts attract attention, with most remaining unnoticed. Klinger and Svensson (2014) argue that under social media, virality is tightly interconnected with popularity in the sense that social media platforms enhance the domination of popular content. This is in stark contrast to traditional mass media, where experts (such as journalists) determine which content to present to the mass audience such 'books to read, movies to watch and what news to put on the agenda'. This means that on social media platforms popularity among like-minded users, not professional gatekeepers, decides whether information is relevant and passed on (i.e. goes viral) or not. And the information that goes viral might sometime be just sensational but without contributing much in terms of communicating politically.

According to Nahon et al. (2011), even this so-called viral dissemination is facilitated if so-called elite and top generalbloggers provide sufficient relevance for a viral start. Usually bloggers are intermediaries rather than gatekeepers, 'because they cannot decide whether a piece of information will be shared beyond their blog or not, but they provide orientation in an environment of informative abundance'. 41 Thus these underlying constraints make it difficult to assess whether social media can be an effective tool of political communication or not. As earlier pointed out, distribution on social media platforms depends on popular online intermediaries who serve as catalysts rather than on the professional gatekeepers of mass media. And by implication, effectiveness in the distribution of content and its influence on political communication relies greatly on the breadth and penetration of the network. However, as earlier indicated, in Uganda, these networks unfortunately have remained an urban-based phenomenon and mostly concentrated among the youth owing to some structural constraints such as limited infrastructure and human capital that are often characteristic of developing countries.

<sup>40</sup> Campbell & Kwak (2011); Van Dijk (2006).

<sup>41</sup> Klinger and Svensson's (2014).

# 2.3 Logic of media usage/audience and organisational capabilities

Recent research (e.g. Klinger & Svensson, 2014) has noted that social media platforms make it easier for like-minded users to socialise from their home environments and over great distances because digital technology facilitates geographically spread niche networks based on interest rather than location. In the case of Uganda, this can be observed from the high involvement of the diaspora community in conversations about political and development processes at home. The personal experiences of the authors of this article show that social media platforms provide useful channels for remaining connected at home and contributing to deliberations on topics of interest even when one is out of the country. So where mass media consumption to a larger extent is bound to geographically defined communities, social media platforms are bound to communities of peers and like-minded others. This has consequences for media audiences. While traditional mass media are directed at mass audiences and the general public, social media platforms may reach a large number of self-selected people, but not the general public. This is because communication in mass media and on social media platforms takes place on different levels: 'one has to take these levels of offline and online publics into account: one cannot compare mass-oriented print media with blogs or discussion boards, as they are situated on different structural levels'.42

The foregoing points to significant consequences for political communication. Specifically, although social media platforms may be construed as a panacea for coordination problems characteristic of mass media, their reliance on like-minded, self-selected people raises serious coordination costs, particularly so in environments with weak civil and political cultures. In contexts with a history of weak political and civic organisations, self-selected participants on social media platforms may appear to engage intensively but without mechanisms for ensuring meaningful deliberative political processes. This results in what economists call 'random noise': a situation where there is increased exchanges on social media but which do not feature in conversations about political issues in the public sphere.

<sup>42</sup> Gerhards & Schäfer (2012: 146).

# 3. Social media and political communication in Uganda: Progress and challenges

Recent evidence suggests rapidly growing internet subscriptions in Uganda: figures from the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) indicate that the total number of fixed and mobile internet subscribers has been rapidly growing - from around 1.6 million in 2012 to 4.2 million in 2014.43 Increasing internet access in this regard suggests more possibilities for the use of web-enabled applications for political communication. Moreover, the fact that mobile users constitute an overwhelming majority (4.1 million) of internet subscribers portends a stronger possibility for social media platforms, where users mostly employ hand-held mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. Thus, the new figures from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) indicating that internet penetration has increased from 20.7 per cent in 2013 to 29.5 per cent in 2014<sup>44</sup> are to be seen as a promising development for those who aspire to harness internet-based platforms (including social media) for political communication.

However, while these figures indicate steady progress, overall internet access remains limited and is mostly concentrated among the urban elite. Notice, however, has to be made of the fact that only around 20 per cent of Uganda's population live in urban areas. <sup>45</sup> Furthermore, although literacy rates have increased significantly to a national average of 71 per cent, <sup>46</sup> most conversations still indicate that many people in rural and urban areas still face challenges with regard to their ability to read and write. This in a way hinders their ability to participate in political communication and conversations via social media.

Notwithstanding the mixed trajectory that internet access figures presents, politicians and citizens seem to be taking advantage of new opportunities in social media to enhance political communication. Observations from the earlier mentioned KAS conference indicated that the new age of smartphones, complemented by increasing

<sup>43</sup> Uganda Communications Commission (2014). Facts and figures. Available at http://www.ucc.co.ug/data/qmenu/3/Facts-and-Figures.html. Accessed, December 02, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Uganda National Bureau of Statistics (2015). *Uganda National Statistical Abstract* 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

internet and social media access, is amplifying the methods as well as the intensity of political activism. Messerschmidt and Rugambwa (2015) chronicle a series of examples where social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have been used to successfully promote political communication and campaigning.<sup>47</sup> These include, among others, the use of social media by politicians seeking elective office to launch campaign programmes and triumphant citizen-led campaigning on issues of human rights and accountability.

#### 4. Use of social media by political leaders and organisations: Case studies

Social media are increasingly seen by political actors as vital instruments for strengthening their 'visibility capital'.48 For example, Barack Obama won the 2008 US presidential election partly as a result of harnessing the power of social media to communicate with, and enlist the support of, millions of Americans who had never previously been active in the processes of an election campaign.<sup>49</sup> The campaign integrated mobile phones, social networking, micro-blogging, video gaming and video-sharing sites as key communication tools that became at least as important as, and arguably more important than, traditional broadcast media. 50 The discovery of this new media as a political mobilisation and organisation tool did not only give political elites a platform to showcase and propagate their ideologies, but it also offered ordinary citizenry the opportunity to actively participate in political discussions and interact with each other through Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, 'likes', shares and comments.

In a digital age where social media plays a significant role in agendasetting, politicians' use of social media is inevitable.51 But what specific roles does social media play in influencing and

<sup>47</sup> Messerschmidt, M. & Rugambwa, I. (2015). Tagging, tweeting, posting: Social media and politics in Uganda. Konrard-Adenauer-Stiftung, Country Report, September 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Tasențe, T. & Ciacu, N. (2010). Contributions of the social networks in the reconfiguration of the society from Romania.

<sup>49</sup> McQueen, T. & Green, L.(2010) Obama's election campaign and the integrated use of social media

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Kagingo, The New Vision, 13 October 2015. Presidential aspirants take battle to social media. See more at: http://www.elections.co.ug/new-vision/ election/1385966/presidential-aspirants-battle-social-media#sthash.sZJSLFvR. dpuf

strengthening political communication? Camelia Beciu (2011) identified the following functions:

- A politician broadcasts his 'controlled speech' and has the possibility of presenting his point of view without being 'interrupted' by the journalists, by his opponents, or by the media format constraints:
- Political opinions and posts broadcast in the traditional media - local and national - are replicated online. Thus, the political actor increases the visibility of his key messages delivered to a target group;
- Owing to new media, politicians can launch a presumptive political and media agenda. Nowadays, it has become common practice for the journalists to give visibility to some statements taken from the blogs or Facebook pages of the politicians. As pointed out in the previous section, this has already created an overlap between traditional media and social media:
- The politicians use the new means of mass communication to promote their policies and the decisions they take in order to give themselves the image of 'good politicians';
- The political doctrines, policies and electoral projects are promoted by social media, in a form other than the one in the traditional political communication. There are used publicly available forms - 'interactive', 'narrative', and 'conversational':
- The visibility of the electoral message designing an alleged online electioneering - is part of a candidate's electoral strategy, and each online resource has a specific function for his campaign;
- Social media simplifies mobilisation of the voters and it gives them the platform to advance and amplify their opinion and to participate in the discussion on some issues of public interest; and
- By using social media, the political actor interacts apparently more 'efficiently' with his voters, beyond the institutional and bureaucratic rigours.

With the inexorable burgeoning of the internet, social media usage is on an unprecedented rise. This trend is not only a Chinese, European or American phenomenon, but it also applies to the urban posh and slummy zones, shanty towns, and rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa. In Uganda in particular, political agents have come to the stark realisation that disengaging from social media is perilous to their political agendas. Because of social media's increasing strength and power in shaping Uganda's politics, even the hitherto conservative government departments and bureaucracies have had to adapt, and embrace the platforms as an important forum of communication with the citizens. 52 This is also partly because of a rapidly expanding youthful population that is technologically savvy and has a strong proclivity to use of social media. As a result, the level of social media engagement as a political mobilisation tool in Uganda is at a record high, and better still, very competitive. In fact, there is no other time in Uganda's recent history that social media has been as highly engaged in Ugandan politics as in the preparation for the 2016 presidential elections.

A classic example is Amama Mbabazi's presidential bid declaration on his YouTube channel on 14 June 2015. The video entitled 'My declaration to the people of Uganda' went viral, forcing some television stations to suspend normal programming to focus on Mbabazi's declaration.53 The declaration was the beginning of what would be Amama Mbabazi's robust social media campaign. This has been followed by the instantaneous ushering in of a weblog, Facebook page and a Twitter handle. His popularity on social media has had an astronomical rise, illustrated by over 91,284 likes on Facebook and 119,414 likes on Twitter relative to Kijza Besigve's that have averaged below 50,000 on both Facebook and Twitter (see Figure 1 below). The #Goingforward hashtag and Mbabazi's Facebook page have become a powerful programmatic, propaganda and agenda-setting tool of the Mbabazi team. It is unsurprising that Amama Mbabazi eventually won the 'Most Influential Personality' category of the 2015 Uganda Social Media Awards. Mbabazi won because he scored highly on the audience reach, frequency of interaction, number of re-tweets, comments and engagement as

<sup>52</sup> Messerschmidt, M. & Rugumbwa, I. (2015). Tagging, tweeting, posting: Social media and politics in Uganda. September 2015. Available at www.kas.de/uganda/ en C O U N T R Y R E P O R T.

<sup>53</sup> Sadab Kitatta Kaaya (2015). Why Mbabazi chose social media launch. The Observer newspaper 17 June 2015.

well as the exquisite quality of his social media communication tools.54 While Mbabazi's lead on social media would be expected to translate into physical electoral support, ongoing analyses by pundits as well as results from opinion polls suggest that this may not be the case. Mbabazi is largely seen as coming to number three in the presidential election in spite of attracting a large following on social media. In this regard, the impact of engagements and conversations on social media stand to be questioned.

On the other hand, other political parties have also embraced social media as an important political communication tool. The NRM party has resorted to Facebook and Twitter to sensitise and educate citizens about the party's achievements and successes of the past 30 years. One NRM Facebook post read, 'In 2006, we were allocating UGX300billion to the roads budget. We are now putting UGX3300billion in roads'. The party is also using social media to engage citizens and make them participate in agenda and ideological propagation. A poem by a P.3 pupil from Ngora district posted on the NRM's Facebook Page on 7 December 2015 provides a candid illumination:

NRM is the giant of all parties in Uganda When I face the East, I see NRM When I face the West, I see NRM When I face the North, I see NRM When I face the South, I see NRM

Similarly, FDC party elites have resorted to social media to not only exhibit their potential to orient the country towards social transformation and economic prosperity but to also downplay the achievements of the ruling NRM party. An FDC Facebook post, accompanied with a photo of a dilapidated classroom in northern Uganda reads: 'The state of social services and education in particular under the NRM is so bad. To change things, vote Kizza Besigye.'

From the above examples, it is common wisdom to imagine, think or say that social media is indeed shaping political participation and

<sup>54</sup> Available at http://socialmediaawards.ug/2015-winners/

interactions in Uganda. But one would still be bewildered if such engagements do translate into tangible political and policy issues. Scattered evidence shows that it does to some extent, at least for short-term political campaigns. For instance, when on 10 June 2015, Daniel Turitwenka, alias Danny-T, a popular youth activist on Twitter and Facebook, was arrested by police as he went to visit a friend in prison, his fellow tweeps started a Twitter campaign to have him released under the Hashtag, #FreeDanny. The campaign ran for two days, and Danny was released on the third day.<sup>55</sup> The same case also applies to the use of social media to showcase abnormalities in Uganda's political landscape as was the case with the Uganda Police's mishandling of an FDC party female official in Kirihura district whose video went viral on social media. Much as this claim was contested by the Uganda Police, this still shows how social media instantaneously spreads sensitive information and how it sparks intense political debates.

With all its blessings, social media also has some inherent ambiguities in political organisation and mobilisation. Among the general challenges listed regarding social media is that the sheer volume of social data streams generate substantial 'noise' which in the end has to be filtered to generate meaningful patterns and trends. 56 Second after second, political agents on both sides of the political spectrum are tweeting, hashtagging, sharing, posting, liking, commenting on politics. This 'noise' suddenly becomes too much and filtering relevant information becomes troublesome.

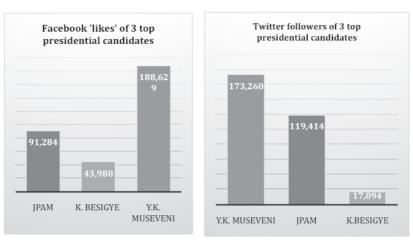
Another challenge of using social media for political work is the user-generated content feature which, paradoxically, is what makes it unique. Any platform which enables a user/visitor to post content poses significant threats to political strategy and mobilisation. Take the example of the poem by the P.3 pupil from Ngora district posted on the NRM Facebook page. One person commented on the same post thus: '[T]he kid meant, when she looks east, west, north or south, she only sees poverty, jiggers, poor education system, corruption, sectarianism, dictatorship which are manifestation of NRM and its dictator Museveni'. Another example is the famous (or

<sup>55</sup> Messerschmidt, M. & Rugumbwa, I. (2015). Tagging, tweeting, posting: Social media and politics in Uganda. September 2015. Available at www.kas.de/uganda/ en C O U N T R Y R E P O R T

<sup>56</sup> Kavanaugh et al. (2012).

rather infamous) Tom Voltaire Okwalinga's seemingly anonymous Facebook page that continuously criticises President Museveni's administration. Several security attempts, including arresting political activists, have not helped track down the content administrator of this social media page. It is, therefore, argued that social media permits the leaking of sensitive political information, which could in the end pose national security threats.

Figure 1: Analysis of social media engagement of presidential aspirants in 2016 general elections



Source: www.socialbakers.com data as of 10 December 2015

It has also been argued that social media is a mere tool of political marketing but without substantive impact on political outcomes. Lisa and Paul (2015) define political marketing as 'the process of exchanges between political entities and their environment and among themselves, with particular reference to the positioning of those entities and their communications'. 57 According to Stanyer (2005), without information and communication technologies, political parties would find it difficult to mobilise their supporters and persuade the undecided voters to support them. Indeed, the three contestants have embraced social media as a political marketing tool, but Amama Mbabazi's social media engagement is timelier and more consistent. During this research period, we visited the Facebook

Harris, P., & Lock, A. (1996, p. 28).

pages of the three candidates on a 30-minute basis for three days and, within that time frame, we determined that Mbabazi had at least one post on a one-hourly basis. His posts include campaign updates and schedules, manifesto updates, meetings etc. President Museveni's social media handles are similarly engaging, although most posts are about his presidential duties and less of electioneering preparation, electioneering is however well captured in the NRM's social media pages. Posts in these social medial platforms follow a 1-2 hourly pattern. The short survey also found inconsistencies and irregularities in the posting patterns of Besigye's and FDC's social media platforms. At certain points, posts are sporadic with large or small time-gaps between posts. These findings supports the view by Harris and Lock (2005)<sup>58</sup> that social media is a cheap and effective tool for political marketing, but many politicians lack 'savvy' in these online marketing approaches, which leads to ineffective use that can be detrimental to fostering their causes. In this vein, social media is about much more than communications; it also includes data, analytics, insight, and value creation.<sup>59</sup>

#### 5. Conclusions and the Way Forward

Theoretical literature as well as examples from the experience of developed democracies show that social media portends a greater contribution to fostering political conversations between political leaders and citizens. On the one hand, this presents opportunities for politicians and political organisations to interact directly with citizens as a means of soliciting support for their political and policy agendas. However, whether this translates into impact on political communication as an instrument of shaping public policy and democratic accountability depends on a number of contextual variables. This paper has shown that the effectiveness of social media as a tool of political communication is contingent on the depth and breadth of the social media network. This is determined by the efficiency and inclusiveness of the supporting infrastructure such as the internet as well as the technological competences and capabilities of the users and consumers. But, more importantly, even though a broad and inclusive infrastructure exists in a technologically savvy society, the analytical framework

<sup>58</sup> Harris, P., & Lock, A. (2010). Mind the gap: The rise of political marketing and a perspective on its future agenda. Journal of Marketing Management, 44(3=4), 297-307.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

developed in this paper emphasises the fact that interaction on social media is highly self-selective, driven by the like-mindedness of users. This potentially generates coordination problems which can only be overcome in organisational structures. This, therefore, implies that the effectiveness of social media as a tool for political communication, among other structural determinants, critically depends on the possibility of proper coordination of the users with organisational frameworks. Only then can interactive engagements be able to proceed beyond just sharing information to coordinating action, including effective political communication.

Recent evidence has highlighted serious organisational challenges that continue to blight many political and civic organisations in Uganda. These range from the absence of ideology, clearly defined and distinguishable policy positions, and weak coordination resulting from weak social capital, limited penetration at all levels of governance – particularly for political parties – , to mention but only a few.60 These internal problems partly account for the failure to properly integrate social media as a key instrument for political communication. Therefore, while many organisations might create Facebook pages, Twitter handles and blogs, many remain underutilised, with few updates, and are only used for galvanising 'likes', as earlier indicated.

Therefore, although social media has expanded the platforms and thus increased the opportunity for citizens to express their political interests and views on public policies and other political issues, it remains largely underutilised because of structural constraints that are characteristic of developing countries. More importantly, this state of affairs results from weak organisational capabilities inherent within many political and civic organisations that have recently embraced the use of social media. This has limited the ability of such organisations to maximise the opportunities presented by social media as a viable avenue for overcoming the coordination problems that are often common in political work.

In fact, mainly as a result of the above challenges, social media access and use remain urban- and elite-dominated, and because

Mugisha et al. (forthcoming). Youth participation in political processes in Uganda: Exploring constraints and opportunities.

politicians mostly use social media platforms for self-promotion rather than holding constructive conversations on policies and political positions. Moreover, citizen views as expressed on social media sites do not show evidence of influencing eventual decisions by political leaders.

Conclusions from this paper have serious implications regarding how much we can rely on social media for political communication. First, given the still limited access to it, it remains largely premature to build a perception of social media as a replacement for traditional forms of mass communication, particularly radio. In fact, there are incidences in the Ugandan political scene when social media posts have been picked up and "voiced more loudly" by radio and TV stations. Perchance, this is an indication that social media is an essential but a somewhat inadequate political communication tool which needs other mass media backups. Second, social media conversations can only reflect an embedded political culture. As long as deliberative democratic practice where citizen views influence political decision-making are not an integral part of the political culture, social media can hardly be a panacea for fostering impactful political dialogue. In view of the Ugandan context, initiatives that seek to foster the application of social media in political communication ought to address issues that foster linkages with traditional media channels as well as supporting the evolution of deliberative democratic practice.

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# SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE IN UGANDA AND HOW IT AFFECTS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Ruth Aine61

#### Introduction

The world today is seen as a global village and this has been made even truer with the establishment of the internet. As a result of the emergence of the internet, communication has become easier and more efficient. To be able to access information from anywhere around the world, one does not have to wait for the news bulletin on a radio station, television station or for newspapers to be printed the following day reporting the previous day's news. The internet has made access to and sharing of information very easy and instant.

The usage of the different avenues on the internet has greatly impacted on the mainstream media houses, government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in very many ways as well, mostly through how they share and obtain information. This report is, therefore, premised on the research carried out to ascertain the social media impact on mainstream media houses, NGOs and government as of November 2015.

Social media usage has taken root in most parts of the world including Uganda and, as a result, there has been such easy access to the news that the world has never been as informed as it is today. People are picking up their mobile phones, turning on their laptops or checking tablets, all of which provide access to social media, which is without a doubt the most significant advance in the recent history of the media.

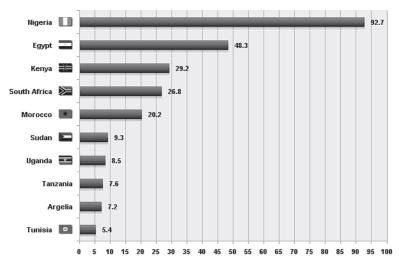
Uganda has since embraced social media usage as a medium of sharing vital information. Different media houses, NGOs, government departments and individuals often take to social media to share

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information or to get informed. This research seeks to find out the influence and impact of social media on Uganda's traditional media houses, government and NGOs.

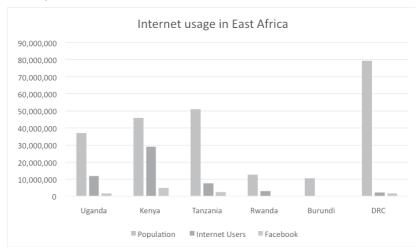
In Africa, Uganda takes the 7<sup>th</sup> position in internet penetration.

Figure 2: Africa Top 10 Internet Countries 2015 Q2



Source: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm

Figure 3: Regional representation of internet usage in East Africa, November 2015



Source: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm#africa

The emergence of social media has facilitated communication through numerous avenues, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, WhatsApp, Google+ and Instagram. It is the usage of these avenues that the research sought to assess vis-à-vis the impact thereof, and to make suggestions on how entities can make the best use of social media.

The study is conducted in Uganda, from a representative sample from among the leading stakeholders based in Kampala. These include government departments such as the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), Parliament of the Republic of Uganda, the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC); NGOs such as Parliament Watch Uganda; and private entities such as NTV Uganda, Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC), NBS TV, Power FM, the Daily Monitor and the New Vision.

Table 1: Social media users and their followers as on the 4 December 2015

SN	Name of user	Face- book likes	Twitter handle	Twitter follow-ers
01	Office of the Prime Minister	5,260	@OPMUganda	848
02	NTV Uganda	380,252	ntvuganda	282,180
03	NBS TV	410,213	@nbstv	32,375
04	UBC TV	15,375	@ubctvuganda	13,240
05	Parliament of Uganda	21,825	@parliament_Ug	17,487
06	Parliament Watch Uganda	20,392	@pwatchug	15,711
07	Power FM Ugan- da	87,511	@powerfmu- ganda	7,154
08	The Daily Monitor	695,862	@DailyMonitor	218,472
09	The New Vision	616,382	@newvisionwire	163,577
10	National Water and Sewerage Corporation	5,918	@nwsc	17,457

## Methodology

This study adopted a predominantly qualitative methodology. Stratified random sampling and the snowball method was used to determine the study sample. The population included mainstream media houses, government agencies, NGOs and individuals. Data collection was conducted through documentary review, key informant interviews, observation and questionnaires (both structured and unstructured).

#### **CHAPTER 1**

# How the emergence of social media and citizen journalism affect the work of traditional/professional media

From the study on the media houses, all the respondents confirmed that social media plays a tremendous role in news gathering and sharing. It provides access to information and people that would otherwise remain unreachable. Social media is preferred by the average Ugandan user because it is fast, cheap and readily available, unlike traditional or professional media.

Citizen journalists document events with any basic mobile device as long as it is internet-enabled. They will upload this content directly on their social media platforms as individuals or give the content to media houses. In many cases, the media houses do not have access to these areas and take time to arrive at the scene. Some media houses have taken advantage of this and even established ways of having the citizens send through the news in the easiest way possible. For example, NTV Uganda developed the NTV GO app, which enables people to share news and footage with the media house.

As citizen journalists continue to feed media houses with all sorts of information, statements like 'amateur video' have become a common element in most of the news coverage, especially in areas of conflict.

Citizen journalism raises a lot of questions on issues of ethics and reliability, among others. While citizen journalists take on the title 'citizen journalist', they are not professional journalists. They are often supporters of certain causes, or just people with smart mobile phones 'found in the right place, at the right time' filming action as it unfolds around them. Therefore, journalists and media houses that opt to use material provided by them need to be careful not to promote propaganda by choosing easy and readily available sources.

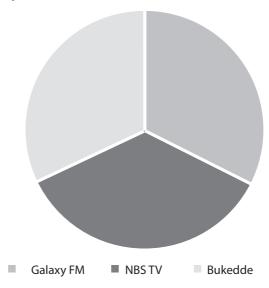
It is however, noteworthy, that news is now broken online, meaning that traditional media is no longer the first and main source of news, and is thus being outcompeted. As a result, many people no longer buy newspapers, for they can get their news online. Media houses are taking advantage of social media and are using their accounts on the different platforms to draw traffic to either their websites or to inform their readers of the content in either print, televised or radio broadcasts. For example, on a daily basis, Daily Monitor posts headlines and links to its articles from their website on Twitter, as a way of directing the interested readers to the website. This has also played to their advantage. Journalists who participated in the research also noted that media houses have resorted to creating and funding social media departments.

#### How journalists in Uganda make use of the opportunities of social media

Journalists in Uganda are increasingly using social media as a source of information for their stories. For example, for journalists who cannot access the Parliament of Uganda for information will often refer to relevant information from social media accounts such as Parliament Watch Uganda on Twitter and Facebook, Parliament Watch is basically an online tracker of Uganda's parliamentary proceedings. At the same time, journalists use social media as a means to share information among themselves and with their audience. There are numerous WhatsApp groups that journalists are part of to help them keep track of what is happening and where. Social media has, therefore, been instrumental as a source and for the sharing of relevant information for journalists in Uganda.

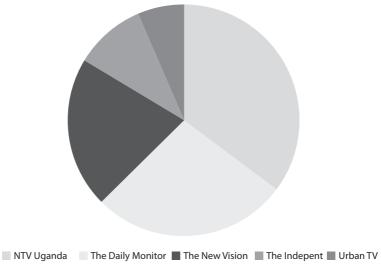
However, with the use of social media to spread information, the quality and ethical standards of journalism are undermined. Almost all journalists want to be the first to break a story and very few pause to ask the important questions such as: Is the information factual? What is the authenticity of the source? Has the story had comprehensive coverage? While social media is a fast way to spread information, misinformation can go undetected, especially owing to the urgency of a story. With social media, one does not verify the source of information before one publishes it.





Source: http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/ total/uganda/

Figure 5: Top media houses on Twitter



#### **CHAPTER 2**

## Social media policies for engagements as a way of breaking or influencing news

All of the respondents from the different media houses, except UBC, confirmed that the media houses has social media policies which regulate staff usage of the official account. The policies are often tailored to suit the interests of the media houses.

Power FM, a Christian radio station based in Kampala, has a social media policy that empowers all presenters and DJs to actively engage in social media usage during the time of their show. The station's target age bracket is persons between 18 and 40 years. The policy also leaves the number of posts to be sent out to the discretion of the social media users. However, the content being shared must adhere to the company image.

However, for government entities, the National Information Technology Authority-Uganda (NITA-U) has drafted a social media policy to regulate usage of government accounts in ministries, agencies and departments. This is the draft currently intended to regulate social media usage for government media houses such as UBC. This has not been popularised within UBC as some of the social media accounts are managed by individuals who acknowledged never seeing any policy at the organisation.

According to NITA-U, it is envisaged that the Government of Uganda will increasingly use social media to interact with citizens or the public to encourage openness and promote transparency and efficiency in service delivery to the citizens through secure platforms.

The respondents observed that at NTV and NBS TV, one person had been assigned the responsibility of managing the Twitter account and channelling out any breaking news on social media. After journalists in the field have sent breaking news to the person running the social media platforms, s/he is charged with the responsibility of sieving such information and verifying it before sharing it on social media. This is intended to ensure that the quality of information is not compromised.

It is certain that media houses in Uganda that engage their audience through social media have social media policies intended to regulate their engagement and ways of breaking or influencing news. These all admitted to using social media tools such as hashtags to draw attention to the information they are sending out to their audience. The strict adherence to the policies, however, depends on how much value these media houses attach to social media.

#### Do blogs and other social media platforms provide an alternative to independent and reliable information?

To a large extent, blogs and other social media platforms provide an alternative to independent and reliable information. Many times mainstream media houses will refrain from publishing stories that compromise their relationships with influential figures or companies. Through blogs and other social media platforms, some of these stories have been successfully run. For instance, on 6 November 2015, when court awarded *Ezee* Money damages after it successfully sued MTN Uganda, a telecommunications giant, no mainstream media house ran the story. However, the story was widely shared on social media, such as on https://medium.com/@oquidave/.

Much as an observation has already been made that social media stories are often not verified, they could facilitate further research where necessary, for authenticity. These could further draw the attention of the concerned parties the need to make the necessary statement on the matter and thus rectify the position on the matter. In the case of MTN, the telecommunications company later published a formal communication in the New Vision and the Daily Monitor regarding the case to make clarification.

### Do the key stakeholders in Uganda have the capacity to analyse and evaluate social media trends?

The social media stakeholders include the government through the Uganda Communication Commission (UCC), the NITA-U, and account owners.

According to one of the respondents, a tech-blogger at Dignited (www.dignited.com), social media trends as a whole are difficult to analyse and evaluate because of the vast amount of data that

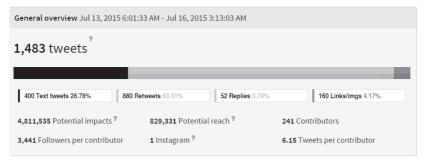
gushes out of the different networks. The data is mainly locked up in the closed-walled gardens of digital corporations based in the United States and regionally in South Africa.

UCC, however, can monitor the prominent social media accounts and trending topics. They can only look at the posts made by individual accounts since these are not companies based in Uganda. As a result, they can only block the website from being accessed in the country because they do not have rights to social media companies.

On many occasions, government has taken an interest in social media trends and even made statements regarding such trends. For example, regarding the recently posted pictures of the Uganda Cranes football team meeting the president, the Uganda Media Centre took an interest and made a statement to clarify the government position regarding the visit, stating that it was a state visit, and not a political visit as was widely shared on social media.

However, individual accounts on social media such as Twitter can micro-monitor their impact through the different tools such as Storify, Keyhole, Topsy and TweetReach.

For instance, Parliament Watch Uganda has been analysing some of their trending topics on the different social media accounts that they have. Below are some extracts.



Source: #MpsEngage Digital Dialogue held July 2015

#### TWEETREACH SNAPSHOT FOR

## #PressFreedomUG



**ACTIVITY** 

Source: #PressFreedomUg held 28th October 2015

#### **CHAPTER 3**

#### The role of social media in shaping public opinion in Uganda

Before the emergence of social media, print media and other forms of media provided the news and that was the end. There was no visible platform for feedback on different issues. Today, the news is more interactive, with most media outlets having a platform where consumers can have a discussion on a topic without necessarily going through the bureaucratic process of writing or emailing editors. For example, most times during newscasts, previously on NTV Uganda and currently on WBS TV, opinion polls are made of topical issues in the country, the response to which is made mostly through social media.

Besides, social media is made use of public opinion leaders, whose views often pass as opinions, therefore influencing how and what the fans or followers think about a particular subject. These conversations will often set the agenda for the topical issues that get covered the next day in mainstream news. This clearly facilitates the shaping of public opinion in Uganda.

Social media platforms create avenues for writers to remain anonymous and, therefore, make it harder for government to trace

the managers of such accounts. A number of political blogs and Facebook accounts in Uganda have leveraged this opportunity to actively engage their audiences in political discussions around the country. For example, TVO-Uganda, a Facebook account, is highly political and continuously sends out posts.

There are, however, few political actors who share political information on social media. This has had an impact on the amount of political information available on social media. Nevertheless, most of the political actors, such as Members of Parliament and political parties, have social media accounts, and take to them to share any political information they intend to share. Such posts often attract large numbers of comments and sharing by the followers of such accounts.

#### Does social media offer more effective democratic space for free speech and freedom of expression?

Democratic space refers to a useful concept that facilitates the analysis and understanding of different societal trends. This helps to hold the state accountable, shape public debate, and facilitate individuals to participate in politics and express their opinions.

Social media has made news spread even quicker, thus encouraging free speech and expression without fear of censorship. To this extent, it is one of the tools that has offered more effective democratic space for free speech and freedom of expression. For instance, there have been civic duty campaigns under the hashtag #Topowa organised by Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU), sensitising Ugandans to their right to vote and advising them to honour their votes. Despite the directives by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) for the campaign to be halted since it deemed it to be partisan, and its subsequently being banned from being aired, the campaign continued on social media and there was no way the IEC could stop citizens from engaging in it.

Following the arrest of some youth in June 2015, there was a social media campaign calling for their release under the hashtag #FreeDanny and #ImpunityUg. This campaign was very instrumental in the release of the activists since their police bond was mobilised

through social media. It is to this extent that social media can be said to be a crucial tool for the provision of space for free speech.

# Does social media lead to a more informed and engaged citizenry?

Incidentally, the consumption of information facilitates the narrowing of the knowledge gap. As a result, citizens become more informed and an engaged citizenry can develop. For instance, the arrest of the FDC party secretary for environment, Zainabu Fatuma Naigaga, on 10 October 2015 was widely shared on social media before it made it to mainstream media. This was later followed by a social media campaign dubbed #StopPoliceBrutalityUg. There was also a tourism campaign on social media, particularly on Instagram, under the hashtags #koikoiUg and #MyUganda256. These have been seen to yield results for the tourism industry in Uganda.

# How social media affects opportunities for political participation and civic engagement

Political parties have embraced the use of social media. Owing to its far and wide reach, social media has been used to campaign and bridge the gap between constituents and their leaders. Most political parties have embarked on social media strategies to make certain that they have a chance at winning the election. Social media was used in 2011 and in the run-up to the 2016 elections the trend is not any different. Currently, the social media space is filled with political hashtags like #NdiSteady, #SteadyProgress #UgandaDecides #GoingForward and #WesigeBesigye. Social media has, therefore, facilitated live coverage of these campaign rallies, however remote they may be, thereby keeping the rest of the country abreast of what is going on.

Social media stimulates citizen engagement with politicians who are brought closer to their potential voters through conversations on social media. However, social media cannot be wholly relied on for the entire campaign since it is not used by all the eligible voters in the country.

However, as far as civic engagement is concerned, there are several benefits that social media presents. The IEC recently updated its

register for the 2016 elections. They, however, took to social media to call out to citizens to check and validate their names so as to ensure that they are duly registered to participate in the elections. Several people shared the link on Facebook and Twitter for others to benefit from it. The IEC has 11,672 likes on Facebook and 432 followers on Twitter. This has improved their engagement of the citizenry with their civic rights and duties.

## How strong is the mobilising force of social media campaigns?

Social media is slowly gaining ground in Uganda and, increasingly, people are becoming more receptive and easier to mobilise. The strength of such mobilisation mostly depends on the cause for which the mobilisation is sought. These are often shaped and communicated through hashtags. For instance, if one wants a discussion on the general elections of 2016 and desires a strong mobilisation force, there is need to get an appropriate hashtag, such as #UgandaDecides. Many times, the strength of the mobilisation is reinforced by users with a larger following, who act as influencers who help drive a more active conversation on the topic of discussion.

We also see that hashtag activism is very common in society. People are very quick to comment and send their opinions, thus contributing to the subject under discussion. However, that does not mean at all that if the activism calls for one to go to the streets, one will do so. We have seen CCEDU carry out online mobilisation called #Topowa that is supposed to rally young people to go and vote because their vote is important.

Such mobilisation also largely materialises to the satisfaction of the organisers. A case in point is a group of young Ugandans under the umbrella organisation 40 Smiles over 40 days who have taken to social media to raise funds for orphaned children and have so far built two dormitories for the children. This they did through packaging of information that became viral on social media because it appealed to the users, and their target audience was clearly defined through the activities designed for the fundraising, such as sports. That, however, was for a social cause. Uganda is yet to see a movement start online and spill over into offline channels.

## Has social media created new forms of civic engagement? How can organised civil society make use of these?

Through the many ways of communicating as well as the fact that what was once online will remain there, new forms of civic engagement were made possible. Previously, there were the traditional mainstream media and people had to write letters and make phone calls, which were not recorded for TVs and radio. However, with social media, communication on the same topic on TV and radio continues online long after the closure of the programme.

Civil society ought to consider the following for effective usage of social media:

- Civil society must have consistent content to share on social media with clear communication to their audience. Content is everything when it comes to social media. For example, Barefoot Law and Parliament Watch Uganda have demonstrated how important it is to have consistent content. Barefoot Law is a non-profit, social enterprise that uses technology, especially social media, to improve access to justice and the law. The objective of this initiative is to provide free legal consultations and services, and to develop information technology and social media solutions to help in breaking the bottlenecks currently faced in the justice, law and order sector, especially in access to justice.
- Civil society should have creative content on social media. Social media platforms such as Facebook are highly visual and to draw traffic to the page, photos, videos and podcasts can be used to effectively communicate to the target audience.
- The content on social media should be able to drive engagement with the consumer of the information. People want to experience the human figure behind the incredible page built. This can only be attained through interaction and responding to the comments they have made.
- The content used should be shareable. Some users need to share some of the information with their followers. It would benefit civil society to have content on social media that is shareable.

- There should be a dedicated team to handle social media so that there is no miscommunication. An example is Virgin Airlines (the best airline for internal flights) in the United States which has a dedicated team of three staff who are employed full-time to manage the company's Twitter account. Much as Virgin Airlines is a business entity, this serves to illustrate how social media is important and should be carefully handled by civil society since it could easily be used to misinform the public through the channelling of wrong information to the public.
- There is need to create a platform for people to be able to post to civil society organisations (CSOs) anonymously. This would encourage those who fear for their lives to be given a voice. Cases have been reported of citizens taken into custody for publishing articles against the government, for example Robert Shaka, who charged with offensive publication and the violation of the Computer Use Act, as reported on www.acme-ug.org. Such occurrences have over time justified the need for anonymity in the publication of articles or messages on social media.
- CSOs that intend to use social media should consider having educational content on their pages. People are increasingly looking for knowledge and CSOs should, therefore, position themselves as the leaders of the fields within which they operate by availing relevant information for their readers.

## Has government embraced the use of social media rather than seeing it as a tool its opponents use against it?

The government has over the years demonstrated that it has embraced social media by actively joining in through the various mediums such as Facebook and Twitter. To this effect, all ministries and government departments have accounts through which citizens interact with government officials. Some of these include UCC, State House Uganda, Uganda Police, Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), and Uganda Media Centre. These have eased communication between the government bodies and the citizens.

As a result, government, through the NITA-U, has gone ahead to establish a social media policy for government ministries,

departments and agencies. This policy is rich in content although still at the draft stage.

However, following some of the problems associated with social media usage, such as the sharing of hate messages, government has been prompted to consider setting up social media guidelines for other users to regulate the hate messages. As a result, a number of times, the police have come out to warn users over social media usage. www.allafrica.com

## How can state/government institutions use social media to bring the state closer to the citizens?

Social media has several uses that government and the institutions can apply to bring the state closer to the citizens, like using social media as a tool for accountability to the citizens and to foster transparency. Government can use social media as a communication tool. There is no need to wait for news-hour or print media for government to share information with the citizens. This would facilitate service delivery by the state.

Government institutions and the state can use social media to get first-hand feedback from the citizens regarding different activities. For instance, the NWSC has been voted the most engaging on social media. This has played a big role in the lives of the citizens who are users of the services provided by the institution. For instance, if one reported a water-related incident on Twitter, tagging the official NWSC account, one will immediately respond on social media, and send a team to work on the issue raised. They also take the initiative to follow up with the reporter whether the issue was addressed or not.

## Social media and political communication

The use of social media to make political communication does not necessarily make it less effective. For instance, on 15 June 2015, the Rt. Hon. John Patrick Amama Mbabazi announced his presidential ambitions on YouTube, and it got several views. Ugandans have embraced the several avenues provided on social media as a mode of communication.

Most communications made by officers holding political offices in Uganda are often taken to be the official communications from such persons or offices. For example, when the current prime minister makes a communication on his Twitter account, it is taken to be the official communication from the prime minister since his account is a verified account. This is the case with the president's twitter account, too, which is also verified.

## How do political parties and candidates in Uganda make use of the opportunities of social media?

Hardly a day goes by without those with social media accounts using them. This, therefore, constitutes an effective platform for political parties to engage their followers in an attempt to canvass support. Besides, social media is cheaper than using mainstream media to call out for support. On top of that, the majority of those on social media are the young people who form majority of the population and who need to be rallied to join political parties for their continuity.

Political parties and candidates can reach out to prospective supporters through sharing of useful content such as party manifestos and agendas, and through open invitations to join their cause.

Young people, especially those with access to the internet, have been deemed to be those 'sitting on the fence' because they are not sure if they want to vote and who to vote for.

## How can the risks of social media (spread of false news, defamation, incitement etc.) be managed? Is it meaningful and feasible to regulate social media?

Much as social media presents numerous advantages in the light of the changing trends in the world, there is need to have some form of regulation of what can go on social media and what cannot. This would help to avoid the spread of false news, defamatory statements, and incitement, among others.

Similarly, social media users need to be educated about the dos and don'ts of social media, the dangers of abusive messages on social media and their liabilities in case of defamation, so that they can better manage their accounts.

There has been talk that the government can and is regulating social media. However, that would mean working closely with the internet service providers. The First World is currently having a conversation on the internet as a basic human right. It would be very presumptuous to think that of any country in sub- Saharan Africa, let alone Uganda. This is because access to the internet is still impractical in so many ways.

#### Conclusion

Social media usage in Uganda is on the rise and different stakeholders are fighting to keep their fair share of the market and stay relevant with regard to the trends. Social media has numerous advantages over traditional media, among them the affordability thereof. Media houses are no longer the main source of information as people easily take to social media to obtain any form of news they desire at any time. Anyone with a mobile phone is capable of being and creating a 'broadcast' house of sorts. It is, therefore, no surprise that the mainstream media houses, too, have joined in and actively engage their audiences on social media. This has also facilitated keeping up with quality since the houses quickly respond to matters of customer care through social media.

To this extent, traditional media houses, government and its departments and agencies, and CSOs/NGOs have to embrace social media usage as a channel to share and obtain information. With politicians also now embracing the use of social media for their campaigns and political announcements, such as that by the Rt. Hon. Amama Mbabazi, I will definitely be looking forward to the 2016 General elections.

It is, crucial for any player or intending player to consider the usage of social media without necessarily relegating the mainstream media houses to the margins. There are some people who still prefer the traditional channels of communication.

## **BREAKING BOUNDARIES: THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR USING** SOCIAL MEDIA IN CIVIL SOCIETY **NETWORKING, ACTIVISM AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Bv Ahmed Hadii62

## Summary

In the recent wave of protests, from the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, through the Occupy movement in the United States, to the exposure of corruption schemes in Kenya, and organization of Walk to Work protests in Uganda, social media has been used to reinvigorate the hopes for democracy, accountability, and even service delivery. With their popular appeal and multimodal affordances, social media, herein taken to mean new media enabled by internet revolution and infrastructure, such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, as well as emails and blogs, have provided a platform for granting visibility to and facilitating the organization of activism. However, the role of social media in sustaining civic engagement beyond protest and fatalism remains under-explored, especially in emerging economies like Uganda. This article introduces Uganda's civil society, addressing the gaps that can be filled through social media engagement, and then addresses the scope and content of social media use in Uganda, with the intention of identifying opportunities and threats for use of social media in both programming, as well as delivery of services. The article establishes that Uganda is already utilizing both traditional media, like radio and TV, as well as social media, such as Facebook, twitter, YouTube, SMS, chartrooms, forums, emails, and websites. The article also finds that there is a growing community of social media experts and practitioners, and new job roles, such as social media managers, are now available. Additionally, the article explains how social media is already contributing to sustaining longer-term involvement of civil society as well as making available

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alternative social imaginaries for facilitating social change. However, the article realizes that the level of use of social media by most organizations is low and, where present, un-monitored. Therefore, the article recommends the need for social media impact analysis, bridging Uganda's digital divide through cost-and-time effective tech training, creating an activists blogging network using pop culture to engage "social media users" politically as well as clear budgeting and alignment of social media goals to organizational long term needs. Finally, the article proposes need for senior management of NGOs and civil society organizations to be taken through social media applications in NGO programming, as well as advocacy and service delivery, to enhance outcomes of projects.

# Background to Civil Society and Social Media Civil Society in Uganda

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), particularly non-governmental organisations (NGO)s, in Uganda are relatively young organizations (most were founded after National Resistance Movement (NRM) regime captured power in 1986). The majority of these organizations have a narrow social base- and thin national geographical coverage. Most leading CSOs are urban-based with a token presence in the rural countryside, concentrated in Kampala, and conduct only limited activities outside the capital. The bulk of CSOs are involved in service delivery activities and relatively non-controversial areas such as health rights, access to water, environmental work, education, and related social service provision programs. However, there are a few that are specifically focused on enhancing democratic space and promoting quality of governance. These are also the loudest and most vocal, given the coverage of their controversial or seemingly controversial issues on traditional and new media. They are very strong or vocal in the areas of governance, accountability, democratization and human rights. The focus of this article is this second category of civil society organizations, and how they have (not) utilized social media to promote their programming, as well as service delivery.

## Challenges and Opportunities for New Strategies (Social Media)

A research by NORAD<sup>63</sup>, an NGOs in Uganda, states that the majority of NGOs in Uganda lack sufficient capacity to comprehensively and sustainably engage the state in policy analysis, evaluation, and monitoring. Secondly, the research notes that space(s) within which CSOs may advance democratization and governance issues are sometimes restricted and that the threat to further control their registration and activities under the proposed NGO Registration (Amendment) Bill presents a big challenge. This problem is compounded by the fear or lack of courage by many NGOs to confront or contradict the state on some issues within the nogo areas. For NGOs, constricted political space means that their activities and potency are necessarily limited to matters outside the explicit political arena and the arena of formal democracy or democratization. This, hence, is the gap and the need for social media: through the use of social media policy analysis, evaluation, and monitoring can be promoted and the political no-go areas can be penetrated. In essence, social media can be used where the state is limiting the movement and actions of NGOs, which is, in more concrete terms, anything that touches on political issues. The current gap on the legislation on social media and surveillance can hence be taken advantage of by NGOs.

#### Social Media and NGOs

## Introducing Social Media

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social media refers to web based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semipublic profile within a well-structured system such as Facebook groups and pages or privately owned Twitter accounts; articulate the list of other users with whom they share a connection; and to view and visit their list of connections and those made by others within the system. In today's world, social media is all encompassing. Social media has provided an equal opportunity for every citizen of this world to freely express and broadcast his or her views and ideas.

<sup>63</sup> NORAD, Study on The Civil Society In Uganda, 2002, available at http://www. norad.no/items/1029/38/2057014607/UGA%20civsoceity%20report.docaccessed on November 5, 2015

Of course, there is the provision of equal opportunity on one side, and the access to this opportunity, which is still limited to access to infrastructure, such as smart phones, computers, and data for internet. If used effectively, social media could have a positive impact on our lives. Apart from internet communication, other scholars such as Della et al<sup>64</sup>expand the definition of social media by asserting that social media involve interactive online communication and short text Messaging Services (SMS). Like commercial organizations, civil society organizations continue to rely on social media as a vehicle to communicate their organizational goals and objectives under the current information and communication technology (ICT). Social media allow users to interact, to share content, and to create content collectively and in so doing, allows for the bottom up generation of data for programming and advocacy.<sup>65</sup>

The internet age has increased interconnectedness of individuals, booted a global public sphere (based on global communication networks), and of 'public diplomacy, spearheaded by a global civil society, and ad hoc forms of global governance<sup>66</sup>. The use of ICTs is growing rapidly, leading to creation of new ICT tools being used to enhance development outcomes and specifically, to improveaccountability, transparency and participation by allowing citizens to publicize their concerns and grievances, share ideas, present information and hold governments to account<sup>67</sup>. Hoffmann<sup>68</sup> writes that the digital revolution has led to the emergence of a new type of public sphere in which the civil society debate involves autonomous citizen action, which both gives courage to the activists through protecting their identities, and hence encourages more bold approaches in exposing government corruption, and such other

<sup>64</sup> Della et al (2005)

<sup>65</sup> O'Rourke, L. (2010). Tanzanian Youth Use of Online ICTs and Famine HIP, Malmo, Sweden, the University of Malmo

<sup>66</sup> Castells, M., 2008, 'The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance', The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, vol. 616, no. 1, pp. 78-93

<sup>67</sup> Walton, O., 2010, 'New ICTs for development', Helpdesk Research Report, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, University of Birmingham

<sup>68</sup> Hoffmann, B., 2010, 'Civil Society 2.0? – How the Internet Changes State-Society Relations in Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Cuba', GIGA Working Paper no. 156, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg

governance issues as has been seen in the WikiLeak files. 69 Hence, whereas public diplomacy has been in existence for along time, internet age expands the space, and provides new toolsto enhance public discourse on matters affecting them.

Garrett<sup>70</sup> writes that new media are changing how activists communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate by affecting the three strands of mobilizing resources, accessing opportunities, and framing of issues. Effectively, hence, the use of social media provides for better and faster means to, firstly, get help and support through publicity of events, to, secondly, access related help from various sources including networks, and, finally, to frame issues in a fluid manner that allows for focus and shifting of concerns with the reality on the ground without having to wait for the traditional 24 hour news cycle.

Haider<sup>71</sup> goes ahead to explain that the widespread diffusion of the internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of social software tools throughout the world contributes to democratic processes, and is an important mechanism for collective action, protests and social movements. While many claims are made about the effectiveness of social media, there is little systematic research that seeks to estimate the causal effects of social media in connection to political and social activism.

The use of social media in organizational activities/projects has been increasing with the development of twitter and facebook which provide for quick news sharing. This is evidenced by the presence of a significant number of organizations using Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, You-tube and other social media networks. However, little is known about the usefulness of social media in organizational performance amongst NGO in East Africa in general or Uganda in

See Luke Justin Heemsbergen, Radical Transparency in Journalism: Digital Evolutions from Historical Precedents, Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition ISSN: 1918-5901 (English) -- ISSN: 1918-591X (Français) Volume 6, Issue 1, pp. 45-65 available at http://www.gmj.uottawa.ca/1301/ v6i1\_heemsbergen.pdf accessed in November 5, 2015

<sup>70</sup> Garrett, R. K., 2006, 'Protest in an Information Society: A Review of Literature on Social Movements and New ICT's', Information, Communication, and Society, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 202-224

<sup>71</sup> Haider, H., 2011, 'Social Media and Reform Networks, Protest and Social Movements', Helpdesk Research Report, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, University of Birmingham

particular. Literature on social media to a large extent focuses on Western countries, linking the social media phenomenon to the works of corporate companies or private sector and touching less on NGOs<sup>72</sup>.

The widespread diffusion of the internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of social software tools throughout the world has transformed communication systems into interactive horizontal networks that connect the local with the global

#### Social Media Elsewhere

"If you want to free a society, just give them Internet access."73These were the words of 30-year-old Egyptian activist WaelGhonim in a CNN interview on February 9, 2011, just two days before long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down under pressure from a popular, youthful, and peaceful revolution. The ordinary people in the Arab street were able to do away with compliance and toleration from authoritarian regimes, also allowed them, once the opportunity arose, to invest in and use social media to change politics rom below. This is not to argue that social media was responsible for the uprisings. The uprisings were made by the people of the Arab countries, but social media acted as a powerful accelerant facilitating the events in ways that were crucial. This revolution was characterized by the instrumental use of social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, and text messaging by protesters with the goal to bring about political change and democratic transformation. 74It was the social media, not formal institutions or political parties, that provided the effective tool for activating the public and for allowing the loose networks of activists and protesters to mobilize, communicate and collaborate. They provided an alternate space for reviving a dormant public consciousness into a sentient, dynamic social discourse. In addition, and as noted above, the use of social media did not suddenly appear during the uprisings. The uprisings

<sup>72</sup> Freer, J. (2007), "UK regional and local newspapers", in Anderson, P. and Wood, G. (Eds), The Future of Journalism in the Advanced Democracies, Ashgate, London, pp. 89-103

<sup>73</sup> See DrSaharKhamis and Katherine Vaughn. (2014) Cyber activism in the Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism Tilted the Balance. Available at accessed on November 5, 2015

<sup>74</sup> Carty, V. and Onyett, J. (2006). Protest, Cyber activism and New Social Movements: The Reemergence of the Peace Movement Post 9/11. Social Movement Studies 5(2): 229-249

were just the boiling point reached after several years of increasing dissent and efforts to change from below<sup>75</sup>, both virtual (through the mushrooming of the blogosphere and digital activism) and real (through 'social non-movements').

#### Case Studies of Social Media in Uganda

According to Braskov<sup>76</sup> there has been an increasing use of social media among East African NGOs whereby actors use socialization networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Whats App for sharing information within organizations and projects. For instance, the "Not Here Project" is among the projects that use social media in East Africa. The project is implemented using a Facebook page and a Twitter account whereby Ugandans are encouraged to report corruption cases so that the culprits are dealt with within the according legal frameworks. A similar example is the "ChanjoYaRushwa Project". The project implementers created Facebook pages for people in Tanzania to report and discuss cases to do with corruption. The Chanjoya Rushwa Project aims at raising people's awareness and advocate for legal measures to be taken against those involved in corruption scandals.

In Uganda, social media has been used by various organizations to deliver social services, as well as to provide background for advocacy. Uganda's population now stands at 35.6 million people with an internet penetration of 15%, which translates to 5 million users<sup>77</sup>. A great majority of Ugandans access internet from their mobile phones. Despite this growth in internet penetration, access is still hindered by poor infrastructure, prohibitive costs and poor quality of service. Uganda has one of the youngest populations in the world with more than half the population below the age of 20 years. The adoption of social media practices in this case is to some extent a generational issue given that the majority of users are young while the older generations have been left to watch from

<sup>75</sup> Morsi, H. (2011). The Virtualization of Dissent: Social Media as a Catalyst for Change. http://www.hanimorsi.com/blog/index.php/archives/2011/02/15/thevirtualizatio-ofdissent-socialmedia-as-a-catalyst-for-social-change-part-onewhygladwell-is-wrong/ (accessed 10 September 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Braskov, R. (2011). Social Media in Development Cooperation, European Union, Roskilde UniversitetsTrykkeri, Roskilde, Denmark.

<sup>77</sup> FreedomHouse, 2012, Freedom on the Net Report, available at https:// freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2013 accessed on December, 2015

the periphery. Social media platforms and blogging platforms are however freely available in Uganda with Facebook, Twitter, linkedn and blogger ranking among the top 15 websites in Uganda according to Alex.com, a global website ranking index. Furthermore, two telecom service providers namely MTN and Orange telecom offer their subscribers free access to Facebook while Airtel Uganda in early 2013 began offering its customers free access to Uganda goes online-an online portal that provides information and local content ranging from news, entertainment, sports, technology and much more. The Freedom on the Net report<sup>78</sup> reports that blogging is on the rise among young Ugandans who are less fearful in their use of the internet as an open space to push the boundaries and comment on controversial issues such as good governance and corruption.

Given the power of social media in causing change, there have been some reflex reactions from the Ugandan government. Naturinda reports that the Uganda Communications Commission quietly asked internet service providers to block communication on Facebook and Twitter messaging platforms for 24 hours during the Walkto-Work campaign in 2011.79 However, internet services carried on without a glitch that day save for subscribers on one Orange networkwho experienced intermittent interruptions. Also, Daily Monitor reports that on May 30 2013, the Government announced that it had established asocial media monitoring unit in its media center to "to weed out those who use it to damage the government and people's reputations."80 Social media has also helped citizens and media actors to circumvent state control, interference and intimidation that is rife as observed by Naturinda<sup>81</sup>, who reports that the banning, harassment and intimidation of the press and closure of media houses has greatly infringed on freedom of expression. In May 2013, when Monitor Publications was shut down, the media continued reporting and providing news updates on its social media accounts on Facebook, twitter and the Monitor website. This shows that police cordoning off a media house's premises may shut down the printing press but not its operations in the virtual world.

<sup>78</sup> Net Report (2012)

<sup>79</sup> Naturinda, S., Butagira, T (2010) 'Government sets 12 conditions for reopening CBS radio', The Daily Monitor Newspaper January. 23

<sup>80</sup> Daily Monitor, 2013. Government Establishes Social Media Monitoring Unit, 14th June, 2013, Page 23.

<sup>81</sup> Supra Note 19.

Text to Change, based in the Netherlands and Uganda, haspartnered with local organizations across Africa and South America. The success of Text to Change's programs in Uganda—focused on promoting HIV prevention and care as well as providing information on malaria, family planning, reproductive health, and child abuse paved the way for Text to Change's emerging presence across Africa and other developing regions. Text to Change is driven by the belief that mobile phones are becoming more affordable and accessible to low-income populations and among young people.82

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) are one of the pioneers in the use of information and communications technology to promote women's rights in Uganda. WOUGNET established its online presence over time while conducting trainings for other NGOs in Uganda to learn how to leverage the power of technology to ease sharing of and access to information. WOUGNET established and moderates one of the most active mailing lists in Uganda. The mailing list provides a platform for civil society and NGOs to share ideas, opportunities, and any other relevant information with subscribers. WOUGNET also uses Facebook and Twitter to share information and mobilize people for activities. WOUGNET has organized several SMS campaigns to raise awareness about causes such as the 16 Days of Activism against Violence against Women. Based on this experience, WOUGNET has also promoted the use of mobile phones (SMS) for advocacy.83

International organizations operating in Uganda have more resources and so tend to make a greater impact with technology tools than some of the local organizations. UNICEF's U-Report, for example, has become a very popular mobile SMS campaign. U-Report is a free SMS-based system that allows young Ugandans to speak out on what's happening in communities across the country, and work together with other community leaders for positive change. With over 60,000 mobile subscribers (youth from different parts of the country), U-Report is the biggest and most active SMS campaign in Uganda.

See JavieSsozi2012. Communicating the Cause: NGOs and Social Media in Uganda. Open Society Foundations, February 7, 2012. Available at https://www. opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/communicating-the-cause-ngos-and-socialmedia-in-uganda accessed on December, 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

Mobile Monday Kampala (MoMoKla) was formed two years ago as the Ugandan Chapter of Mobile Monday Global, a network of mobile industry professionals and startups in 100 cities around the world. Over the past two years MoMoKla has organized events and invited speakers, developers, and key policymakers to talk about the role of mobile technology in development.

Of course, civil society groups are also using social media to facilitate political debates. The "Walk to Work campaign" and the Save Mabira Campaign gained support on social media sites from people within and outside Uganda. Facebook pages played a major role in terms of promoting the campaigns. People with mobile phones and digital cameras uploaded photos of the police and army harassing citizens who were peacefully protesting. In a radical move, the government attempted to block Facebook and Twitter following this campaign -a sure sign that there is power in social media.

Finally, 40 Days over 40 Smiles Foundation (40-40), a Kampala based independent youth-led charity organization, has utilized social media to raise over 150 million Ugandan Shillings for various causes focused on nutrition, literacy, entrepreneurship, and children health. Their model hinges on the use of social media as a platform for raising awareness on pertinent issues in our community and subsequently finding solutions. And with reference to civic action, advocacy, and networking, their use of social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, to create nucleus communities which are comprised of 40 members, leads to participative approaches to social enterprise and has earned them the status of being requested by the leading human rights agency dealing in election monitoring and voter education, the Citizens Coalition for Electoral Democracy, CCCEDU, to be part of their program in promoting registration of citizens, under the Votability and Topowa campaigns respectively. Their events host over 1000 youths and they have a presence on all major social media platforms. The 40-40 foundation's successful deployment of programs over social media can be seen by its transparency, including minutely detailed budget reports as well as their awards and partnerships with leading organizations such as the African Hope Network Leadership Grant, Mavuno Church Kampala Social Impact 2014 Award, Commonwealth Youth Development Award- Best Social Justice Category, The National Winner of the NSSF Torch Awards, Hit Awards and successful partnerships with the Global Health Corps (GHC), Blush Media, X-FM, and Cipher 256, to mention but a few. This is a use of social media to effect change in enhancing participation in political processes.

## Recommendations on the Use of Social Media by Ugandan Civil Society

There have been various initiatives to enhance theefficiency and effectiveness among organizations including use of various organizations and their communication channels between stakeholders, particularly the use of ICT. Social media are among the communication channels that organizations have adopted and started using in order to improve their performance. Despite the widespread diffusion and use of ICT and social media in society and in NGOs in particular, it is not yet reported how and to what extent social media have contributed to the improvement of organizational performance. Elytantawy and Wiest<sup>84</sup> demonstrate that activists and organizations that defend people's rights can use the internet to initiate and organize a number of activities such as consumer boycotts, public protests, and demonstrations.

Haider<sup>85</sup> discusses various factors leading to the success of social media by activists or civic organisations; leadership, links to conventional media and other activists, elite reaction and external attention.

Some of the proposed recommendations for effective use of social media by activists and NGOs for networking, activism and civic engagement purposes include: the need for clear management of social media accounts, monitoring of effects, and bridging the digital divide through cost and time efficient tech trainings, among others as discussed below.

<sup>84</sup> Elytantawy, N. and Wiest, J. B. (2011). Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Reconsidering Resource Mobilization Theory, International Journal ofCommunication, High Point University.

<sup>85</sup> Haider, H., 2011, Social Media and Reform Networks, Protest and Social Movements', Helpdesk Research Report, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, University of Birmingham

## Bridging Uganda's Digital Divide through Cost-and-Time Effective Tech Training

For a country like Uganda, booming with mobile innovation, a large percentage of its population still experiences limited to no cell phone signal or data services of any kind. Moreover, the speed and costs of internet services varies widely between regions, creating further barriers for non-profits and activists wishing to use social media for advocacy. There is need for comprehensive social media trainings for people living in remote areas on, for example, updating their Facebook accounts and showing them a feasible way they can brainstorm and share content, in a time-efficient, cost effective way. Such training can address the challenges of use of social media tools, and the low penetration of the same in the rural areas.

## Using Pop Culture to Engage "Social Media" Users Politically

A recent study shows thatmost Ugandans use social media for games, fun, and entertainment. At the same time, there are many complaints of how difficult it is to get youth to engage, coupled with emphasis on how there's a strong need for civic engagement around "serious" issues. Clearly, in order to increase engagement among the majority of Ugandans who prefer to use social media for fun and entertainment, there is need to find a way to make the political issues fun and engaging. The above mentioned 40-40 Foundationfeatured Ugandan celebrities and humor-driven campaigns to engage youth around their social justice campaigns. The 40-40 foundation's mission is to encourage youth to become more responsible citizens through using pop culture as a core element of their media strategies to ensure that the tenor of their messaging resonates with their target base. This has seen them influence more than two million voters under the *Votability* campaign that encourages registration of voters for the upcoming 2016 elections and can be categorized as a great case story to replicate for other movements and projects.

## Nurturing (More) Ugandan Social Media Experts

NGOs need to identify and nurture a network of legitimate social media experts and strategists, one which activists, non-profits, and/or campaigns could call upon for advice, expertise, and most importantly, training. The Ghana Decides' model of offering social media trainings to their civic engagement partners (including NGOs that work with marginalized communities such as women, youth, etc.) is a movement-building model worth replicating by Ugandan organizations. Investing in the social media capacity of their partners could essentially duplicate their outreach efforts, and maximize their chances of engaging a wide, diverse audience on the potential of political power (both online and offline) of Ugandan communities. For this, social impact organizations would be trained to more efficiently engage their social networks as trainers to nurture an elite class of social media experts or change makers.

## Creating an Activists Blogging Network

It's not every day that marginalized groups experience the thrill of connection, especially as intensely as that happens at conferences where there's shared interest (and in this case, identity) on the importance of staying connected. Being able to support each other across issues and across borders, and count on the signal-boosting power of a network of Ugandan activists online, could make a huge difference to local organizing efforts that can inspire positive change and progression in a community.

#### Conclusions

This article has focused on how social media acted as effective tools for promoting civic engagement through supporting the capabilities of the democratic activists by allowing forums for free speech and political networking opportunities, providing a virtual space for assembly, and supporting the capability of the protestors to plan, organize, and execute peaceful protests. However, NGOs that are already using social media still face a number of challenges. Many organizations will admit that they don't actually know how to effectively use these tools to communicate or engage their audience. Social media gives users rights to comment and share their opinions and information as they wish. When people log into the social media, the thought of creating and starting a revolution is pretty far from their minds. But globally, social media has become an important platform for dissent and outlet for political and economic frustration. As noted in the introduction, however, it would be wrong to characterize the uprisings as 'revolutions' of the social media. Their 'leaderless' character was a genuine bottom-up expression of public will. The political, economic and social oppression of the

people, the lack of government transparency and unemployment were the real motivating factors behind demands for reform. People were united under their desire to ensure the fundamental principles of human security, dignity and respect to human rights, their share in a respectful, decent life and prosperity. Nothing could have happened if there were no people willing to be physically present in the streets, ready to put their own life at risk, in order to fulfill their demands and achieve their goals<sup>86</sup>.

One may however argue that, social media have not only alleviated the obstacles to the dissemination of information and collective action, but have also created a shared meaning among citizens and networks of activists in the region. As the continuing protests in Egypt indicate against the slow pace of reforms in Egypt, social media are not only capable of constructing calls for actions that allow for a large number of people to join, but also create a serious threat to the legitimacy of political regimes enabled people in Tahrir Square and elsewhere to talk, discuss and act freely. In so doing, they not only contributed to the empowerment of civil society in the world, but also to the consolidation of a critical mass of active social media users in the region.

Although it is still very early to make an assessment of the role these social media users might have in the democratic reforms of emerging democracies like Uganda, one should not ignore Uganda's young population and increasing penetration rates. Youth (between the ages of 15 and 29) make up around 75% of Facebook users in Uganda. At the beginning of April 2011, eight countries had acquired more Facebook users (as a percentage of population) than the US, one of the highest-ranking countries in the world in terms of Facebook penetration<sup>87</sup>. Given this, one cannot but assume that the social media will continue to play a growing role in political, societal and economic developments in Uganda. With new players and means of communication, it may usher some far reaching changes in the region's politics.

<sup>86</sup> Khoury, D. (2011). Social Media and the Revolutions: How the Internet Revived the Arab Public Sphere and Digitalized Activism. Perspectives, Issue 2:80-86.

<sup>87</sup> Salem, F. and Mourtada, R. (2011b). Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter. Arab Social Media Report #1. Dubai: Dubai School of Government

Social media is, of course, a double-edged sword, used by undemocratic and repressive forces to plant farcical stories, stifle debate, monitor the masses, and track activists.

Nevertheless, social media can be an incredibly powerful tool. Events like the Arab Spring would not have garnered as much international attention nor spread so rapidly had it not been for the effective use of social media by activists. What previously may have taken years to achieve can now take days, hours or even minutes. But let us celebrate the possibility and potential of social media by being honest about its role and limitations.

Social media has given voice to news and opinions that are often ignored by mainstream media that is largely state controlled in various countries, including Uganda. Social media has also been instrumental in highlighting human rights violations by state machinery especially the police and in helping citizens and media actors to circumvent state control, interference and intimidation. Its independence and popularity was further strengthened by reports that Facebook had turned down requests by the Government of Uganda for information on accounts. Its growth and popularity is even more vivid when one compares the circulation statistics of the major dailies and the likes on their Facebook pages and the followers on their twitter accounts. Daily Monitor's circulation figures of 30,000 copies for instance pale in comparison to the 100,000 likes on their Facebook page. For as long as it maintains the features of openness, interactivity, participatory and user centered activities, social media will remain a force to reckon with in news conveyance.

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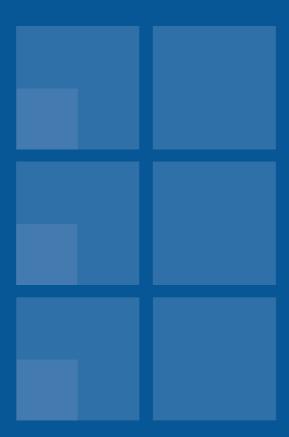
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