

## UGANDA

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MAIKE MESSERSCHMIDT

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# Tagging, Tweeting, Posting: Social Media and Politics in Uganda

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

**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 uncomfortable 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 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, equaling, however, only 24,4 percent of the population. As of June 2012, 562.000 Ugandans had Facebook accounts<sup>1</sup>. It is estimated that this number has grown threefold today, reaching around 1,5 million people out of the overall population of 34,8 million people<sup>2</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 32%. At last count, Ugandan internet users had clocked 11,9 million, according to the country's communication and ICT regulator, the Uganda Communications Commission<sup>3</sup>. 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, 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.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ubos.org/onlinefiles/uploads/ubos/NPHC/NPHC%202014%20PROVISIONAL%20RESULTS%20REPORT-.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ucc.co.ug/files/downloads/Q1-Market%20Report%202015.pdf>

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An example of the power users of social media platforms can develop is the case of a maid in her mid-20s who hit international headlines late last year 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 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 online outcry 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>, 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 confidants, it emerges, also share a love for social media. Both are active tweeps, being followed by 141.000 and 98.000 followers respectively.

Mbabazi would follow up his declaration with a press conference on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 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.

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, he stated that government spokespersons must "[...] listen, discuss and engage [...]" citizens online. "Communication Online is no longer one way", he says. "Engagement is Key."<sup>4</sup>

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, had 2.526 followers on its twitter account, where

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<sup>4</sup> More information about the conference under <http://www.kas.de/uganda/en/publications/42116/> and <http://www.kas.de/uganda/en/events/64479/>

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it had posted 1.165 tweets at last count. The Forum for Democratic Change, the leading opposition party, had 1.295 followers, with 977 tweets. 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.

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. Rumors, defamation, and hate speech also reigned freely.

In April this year, Minister for the Presidency, Frank Tumwebaze, paraded Habib Mboowa, a political activist, before the press so that 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, claiming the minister had been suspended and arrested<sup>5</sup>.

The rumour 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 spread 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 would made 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."

### **Calls for Regulation**

As can be seen from the examples above, the government has good reason for growing uneasy 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 ("TVO") Facebook page, a masked yet enigmatic personality, famous for his politically charged and explosive revelations on the behind 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>6</sup>. In May, an information and security analyst was arrested and charged with "offensive communication" according to the Computer Misuse Act of 2011<sup>7</sup> - he was suspected to be "TVO". However, even during the time he spent in prison, the Facebook page remained active and left the security agencies guessing.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Tumwebaze-parades-man-behind-his-Facebook-woes/-/688334/2613470/-/uxaasx/-/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.observer.ug/news-headlines/38278-who-s-tom-voltaire-okwalinga-tvo>

<sup>7</sup> [http://chapterfouruganda.com/sites/default/files/downloads/Computer-Misuse-Act-2011\\_0.pdf](http://chapterfouruganda.com/sites/default/files/downloads/Computer-Misuse-Act-2011_0.pdf), p. 17.

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Above mentioned Act is the only legal document that has the goal to specifically “prevent unlawful access, abuse or misuse of information systems including computers”.<sup>8</sup> It includes above mentioned “offensive communication”, which refers to electronic communication that is willfully and repeatedly used to disturb the peace in the country or the right of privacy of any person. Furthermore covered in this act are offences like 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>9</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”<sup>10</sup>. Not included in the debates is usually the fact that on all these issues, 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 harassment and abuse. 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 defined crimes on social media which were described as “the misuse of cyberspace inciting hatred and sectarianism”<sup>11</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 has already set up a specialized social media monitoring unit, while at the above mentioned KAS organized Social Media Conference, the Executive Director of the Uganda Communications Commission, Godfrey Mutabazi, noted that some social media accounts like Facebook and you tube allow “undesirable content which is not good for our people. [...] Regulation must be enforced,” he said.

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.

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

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.: p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/7-girls-raped-via-Facebook-in-one-month/-/688334/2898628/-/70wt64z/-/index.html>, <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Government-close-media-outlets-pornography/-/688334/2627430/-/y08wl4/-/index.html>, <http://acme-ug.org/2015/07/13/hunting-down-social-media-abusers-in-uganda-as-elections-near/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Government-close-media-outlets-pornography/-/688334/2627430/-/y08wl4/-/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://acme-ug.org/2015/07/13/hunting-down-social-media-abusers-in-uganda-as-elections-near/>

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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 handover 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 by 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 the only way of advancing critical issues to be addressed in an endless and sometimes frustrating bureaucracy and limited space for constructive political and civic engagement like Uganda's.