

Digital Voter Manipulation:

A situational analysis of how online spaces were used as a manipulative tool during Uganda's 2021 General Election



KONRAD-ADENAUER-STIFTUNG

Uganda & South Sudan Office

51 A, Prince Charles Drive, Kololo
P.O.Box 647 Kampala, Uganda
T: +256 312 262011/2
E: info.kampala@kas.de



@KasUganda



Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Uganda & South Sudan

www.kas.de/uganda

Author:

Songa Samuel-Stone

Contributor:

Shemei Agabo

Editors:

Solomon Serwanjja

Anna Reismann

Judith Atim

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.



African Institute
for Investigative
Journalism

AFRICAN INSTITUTE FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Plot 12163 Kiira Bulindo Rd.,
Kira Town Council
T: +256 789 009582
E: info@africanaiij.org



@AfricanIJ

www.africanaiij.org

Digital Voter Manipulation:

A situational analysis of how online spaces were used as a manipulative tool during Uganda's 2021 General Election

Foreword

As social media usage and digital communication proliferate, so does voter manipulation in digital spaces. The gathering and distortion of data to target and manipulate the voter, the usage and publication of false data or data presented out of context or in a wrong context, false information, false digital identities, fake accounts, fabricated content, fake news and the like are tools and methods that have proven to have an immense impact on the election process, the electorate and can be decisive in terms of the election outcome.

Examples of how the above mentioned methods were and can be used during the elections are many across the globe. The landscape of organizations, institutions and individuals involved in these malpractices from within a particular political system and from the outside is very diverse: from political opponents and their aligned/affiliated institutions themselves over private digital communication organizations to (foreign) state-related actors. Digital communications have played and continue to play a significant role in political campaigns and impacting political processes in various ways.

The 2021 Ugandan General Election took place amidst the global Covid-19 pandemic with digital platforms and social media being even more important as a source of voter information. Being declared “scientific elections” at a very early point of time, the digital space was to become a center stage for political competition due to the restrictions upon physical gatherings.

When the idea to this situation analysis was born, the idea was to look closely into the Ugandan example and to analyze whether voter manipulative malpractices would be applied in the Ugandan General elections and, if so, to analyze the form and the scale of these malpractices as well as to identify the actors behind them. How the use of Coordinated Inauthentic

Behaviour (CIB) was employed to tilt the political narrative and the kind of impact it created in shaping the on-line conversation during the 2021 election period, has become the main emphasis of this publication. It also points out what led to the five-day internet shut down during the Ugandan General Elections and outlines the impact and possible repercussions in the future elections given the growth and an increasing importance of digital space.

Supporting the publication of this report is part of our work as Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung to strengthen the democratic and constitutional forces and institutions both in Germany and abroad. We are convinced that vibrant political parties are a prerequisite for any functioning democracy.

We are thankful to the African Institute for Investigative Journalism and Mr. Stone Songa for working on this report and we hope that you will find the discussions here worth reflecting upon.

Anna Reismann

Country Representative
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Uganda and South Sudan

Background

The 2021 Ugandan General Election was unprecedented in a number of ways, mainly because it took place against the backdrop of a crippling global pandemic.

Restrictions¹ put in place by the Electoral Commission as part of efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 banned physical rallies and encouraged aspirants to explore alternative options of engaging potential voters. This was later revised to allow up to 200 supporters at a single rally².

Such interventions amplified the role social media played in the entire process and increased the likelihood of digital voter manipulation, even in a country where only a small fraction of the population has access to the internet (internet penetration stood at 24% or 10.67 million users as per January 2020³). Only an estimated 2.5 million are said to be active social media users.

Nevertheless, the jostle to control the online narrative ahead of the election was on, as new media platforms became the latest frontier. By mainly examining two Twitter hashtags that reflected the main camps in the electoral process, this situational analysis report will highlight instances of digital voter manipulation as evidenced on #WeAreRemovingADictator and #SecureYourFuture.

The purpose of this report is to analyse the scope and the depth of voter manipulating practices, methods, and their possible impact on political participation as well as the outcomes of the 2021 General Election in Uganda.

Supporters of the singer-turned-political force, Robert Kyagulanyi Sentamu aka Bobi Wine, 39, used #WeAreRemovingADictator while supporters of Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, 76, mainly trended with #SecureYourFuture. While other hashtags such as #Sevolution and #M7UGsChoice were used, #WeAreRemovingADictator and #SecureYourFuture best capture the role digital spaces played in enabling and countering instances of voter manipulation, given their overall traction.

¹ Reuters. Uganda halts campaigning for January 14 vote in several districts. Accessed February 20, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/26/uganda-suspends-campaigning-in-several-districts-ahead-of-polls>

² Curfew stays but political rallies, churches, weddings and casinos get green light. The Independent. Accessed March 1, 2021. <https://www.independent.co.ug/curfew-stays-but-political-rallies-churches-casinos-get-green-light/>

³ (2019) datacatalog.worldbank.org

It is worth noting that while most of the examples carried in this report pin the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party whose candidate, Mr. Museveni, won the election with over 59%⁴, other players like opposition supporters and even some media outlets were also not without blemish. However, the government remained the biggest player when it came to efforts to digitally manipulate voters.

2021 provided another opportunity for the Ugandan government to rehearse available techniques such as the use of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) to influence and distort online conversation. There is no evidence that opposition players went to similar lengths.

That governments play a major role in digital voter manipulation is not new. A 2019 report⁵ by Freedom House warned of a “crisis” where governments world over are increasingly using social media to manipulate elections and monitor citizens. Manipulation in this case, as defined by another report by the Oxford Internet Institute, largely involves the spreading of fake news, misinformation and toxic narratives in order to sway public opinion.

The Oxford report⁶ described the use of new media tools and techniques to influence elections in this manner as a “critical threat” to democracies.

In the case of Uganda, even at a somewhat limited scale, the examples of efforts towards manipulating voters indicate a willingness on the part of the government to increasingly control the online narrative. Its unsurprising decision to completely switch off the internet on the eve of the 2021 elections concretises such moves as part of how states are manipulating and controlling their citizenry today.

The case for keeping the internet accessible and free of distortion has never been stronger. As a 2019 Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung commissioned research paper⁷ on social media, local government and development in Uganda put it, *“social media eases political mobilization and makes it cheaper, facilitates a more effective interaction between politicians and their electorates”*.

⁴ Publishing of the Final Results for Presidential Elections 2021. Electoral Commission. Accessed March 1, 2021. www.ec.or.ug/news/publishing-final-results-presidential-elections-2021

⁵ The Crisis of Social Media. Adrian Shahbaz. Accessed February 10, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2019/crisis-social-media>

⁶ The Global Disinformation Order. Samantha B., Philip H. Accessed March 8, 2021 <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf>

⁷ Agena M. Ojok. D. others. Social media, local government and development in Uganda. 2019. KAS.

Contents

Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour	1
Manipulating The Narrative	9
Outside Influence	13
Social Media as an Equaliser	16
The Future of Digital Voter Manipulation and Elections	19
Conclusion	23



Source: Lagos Techie, www.unsplash.com

01

Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour

Digital voter manipulation in regards to the Ugandan 2021 election was best captured by the revelation that several social media accounts linked to the ruling NRM party and candidate Museveni were involved in coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB).

While there is no clear definition⁸ for what constitutes CIB, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have increasingly carried out purges aimed at eliminating accounts whose activity crosses a certain line. The affected accounts were involved in what an investigation⁹ by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) called a “*coordinated campaign to promote Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni ahead of the country’s January 14, 2021 presidential election.*” Among others, the accounts involved posted verbatim messages supporting Mr. Museveni and his government while criticising the opposition, particularly his political challenger, Bobi Wine.

In one instance, a tweet by the then presidential press secretary Don Wanyama elicited the exact response from eight different accounts (Mr. Wanyama has since been named CEO of Vision Group, a state-affiliated media conglomerate).

As seen below, on November 30, 2020, Mr. Wanyama tweeted: “*As @KagutaMuseveni heads to Pallisa, this road, in final stages, will be a game changer in this part of the country. This is what we mean by #SecuringYourFuture #SevoLution*”.

The identical responses to his tweet were posted minutes apart, between 11:17 and 11:21 East Africa Time (EAT), DFRLab found.



⁸ Evelyn Douek. Slate. What Does “Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior” Actually Mean?. Accessed March 7, 2021. <https://slate.com/technology/2020/07/coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-facebook-twitter.html>

⁹ DFRLab. Social media disinformation campaign targets Ugandan presidential election. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/social-media-disinformation-campaign-targets-ugandan-presidential-election-b259d8bb1aa8>



Such online activity suggested the existence of a coordinated digital strategy aimed at amplifying messages that portrayed the incumbent in good light, in this case, by juxtaposing his campaign trail with a tarmacked road- a sign of development.

It is worth noting that by virtue of being the sitting president, Mr. Museveni enjoys unfettered access to state resources and more positive coverage by the media, compared to any of his rivals. This unfair balance in media coverage has previously been part of the grounds for filing a presidential election petition.

According to the African Center for Media Excellence (ACME)¹⁰, in November 2020, while Bobi Wine took up the highest share of stories in newspapers, TV, and radio, they were largely of a negative tone. Where the incumbent was covered waving at supporters and opening infrastructural projects, his challenger made headlines for being at the receiving end of police brutality or in defiance of COVID-19 guidelines whose enforcement he maintained was unfair throughout the process.

By amplifying Mr. Wanyama's tweet, in such coordinated fashion, the suspect accounts above contributed to online efforts aimed at purposely giving Mr. Museveni, in power since 1986, a positive framing as an agent of development.

Instances of CIB also revived talk that the ruling NRM party or the government itself was running a centre where several young people were employed to run accounts such as the ones that responded to Mr. Wanyama's tweet. The government denied the existence of such a centre.

The DFRLab investigation on such pre-election suspect online activity led Facebook and Twitter to execute a purge in which over 100 pro-Museveni and pro-government accounts were pulled down. DFRLab said after they submitted their findings, the two platforms conducted separate investigations and took action *"against assets for violating their rules regarding coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB)."*

¹⁰ ACME. Uganda media coverage of the 2021 elections October - November 2020. Accessed February 6, 2021. <https://acme-ug.org/2020/12/23/new-report-ugandan-media-coverage-of-the-2021-elections-october-november-2020/>

Facebook's purge happened on January 8, while Twitter followed on January 10, 2021.

Facebook's internal investigation, according to a statement¹¹, attributed the network to a group within Uganda's Ministry of Information, Communications and Technology:

"This month, we removed a network of accounts and Pages in Uganda that engaged in CIB to target public debate ahead of the election. They used fake and duplicate accounts to manage Pages, comment on other people's content, impersonate users, and re-share posts in Groups to make them appear more popular than they were. Given the impending election in Uganda, we moved quickly to investigate and take down this network. We found this network to be linked to the Government Citizens Interaction Center at the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology in Uganda. Per our normal reporting process, we will share more details about the networks we removed this month in our January CIB report which we'll release at the beginning of February," (sic)

While the government denies the existence of such a scheme, the decision by the two social media networks was perhaps the first clear piece of evidence that linked the government with digital voter manipulation, particularly through the creation of fake accounts whose only role was to amplify messages that framed candidate Museveni neatly.

Facebook, Quartz later reported¹², linked the operation to the Government Citizen Interaction Centre at Uganda's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology.

The center's manager, Duncan Abigaba¹³, one of the victims of the purge, denied the existence of such organized efforts to distort online conversation.

In his response to Facebook's decision to ban several accounts linked to the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party, days before the election itself, flagbearer, Mr. Museveni, accused the tech giant of arrogance and interference¹⁴. Perhaps as a punishment, Facebook remains partly inaccessible and users still need a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to access the platform.

The purges by Facebook and Twitter highlight the growing influence social media companies have over online discourse. The manner in which purges of this kind are carried out continues to be a point of debate, with many arguing that such moves threaten the idea of freedom of speech, after all, there is nothing particularly wrong with several accounts being fashioned to amplify a message in favor of one candidate. It's an election. However, it is important to keep these online spaces free of such behavior that only aims to distort by inorganically amplifying certain messages and frames. That is manipulative.

Among the key identifiers, the accounts in question contained little to no personal information and tend to limit their content to a given subject or topic while retweeting/re-sharing content from similar accounts only. When their profile photos are put into Google Reverse Image Search, they are likely to turn up on several sites as stock photos or photos belonging to other people.

¹¹ Quartz. Facebook has taken down hundreds of political accounts in Uganda days ahead of a tense election. Accessed March 4, 2021. <https://qz.com/africa/1955331/facebook-takes-down-pro-museveni-accounts-as-election-nears/>

¹² Quartz. Facebook has taken down hundreds of political accounts in Uganda days ahead of a tense election. Accessed March 4, 2021. <https://qz.com/africa/1955331/facebook-takes-down-pro-museveni-accounts-as-election-nears/>

¹³ Mr. Abigaba was interviewed on the sidelines of Face the Citizens, a TV talk show, during the taping of an episode on the internet shutdown

¹⁴ NYT. Uganda blocks Facebook ahead of contentious election. Accessed March 4, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/world/africa/uganda-facebook-ban-elections.html>

Take the example of @CherryGisha, one of the now-deactivated accounts used to amplify pro-Museveni messages and attack the opposition. The account was also used to make unsubstantiated rape allegations against NBS TV journalist Canary Mugume, a day after he questioned Mr. Museveni's son Muhoozi Kainerugaba in a cheeky response to an ethnocentric tweet¹⁵ the latter had published.

In his initial tweet, Mr. Muhoozi, had wondered why Bobi Wine, a Muganda, was christened 'Musinguzi' by his supporters in western Uganda. The name means 'a victor'. In the same tweet, Mr. Muhoozi further asks 'Mbweni ugu akasingura ki?' (Loosely translated to mean 'What have you ever been victorious at?')

Mr. Mugume's response puts this same question to Mr. Muhoozi in response.

'Mbweni iwe okasinguraki?' (Loosely translated - 'But for you, what have you ever been victorious at?')

Both tweets have since been deleted.

In a series of tweets in the aftermath of the above exchange, @cherrygisha made rape claims against Mr. Mugume and also accused him of being gay.

The unproven allegations aside, saying Mr. Mugume is gay tactfully reechoed¹⁶ rhetoric from President Museveni days to the election.

Without giving any evidence, Mr. Museveni claimed during several interviews given to international media outlets that his rival receives "quite a lot of encouragement from foreigners and homosexuals," adding that: "Homosexuals are very happy with Bobi Wine. I think they even send him support."

The Ugandan government receives over \$970 million¹⁷ in financial assistance annually from the United States alone.

@cherrygisha's claim tapped into that same climate of bigotry in an attempt to intimidate the journalist. It soon emerged that whoever was running the fake account was using a photo that belonged to a Rwandan national who publicly called them out on the matter.

The photo, as per reverse image search, also appears on several other platforms.



¹⁵ Both tweets are no longer available online as they were deleted

¹⁶ The Guardian. 'Agent of foreign interests': Museveni lashes out at Uganda election rival. Accessed March 5, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jan/11/yoweri-museveni-bobi-wine-uganda-election>

¹⁷ U.S. State Department. Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet. Accessed March 8, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-uganda/>

@cherrygisha and the eight accounts that responded to Mr. Wanyama's tweet reveal how such suspect accounts can be unleashed on short notice to fight online wars on several fronts, corroborating further the evidence on CIB during the 2021 Ugandan General Election.

In the past, CIB has been cited as the reason for Twitter and Facebook to suspend and remove several accounts in the United States. According to a report¹⁸ from The Washington Post, the affected users were part of "broad coordinated effort" led by a prominent conservative youth organization known as Turning Point USA. Majority of the affected accounts were using their platform to publish comments that generally sought to cast doubt on the US 2020 election and downplay the threat of COVID-19.

However, purges of this kind raise two main concerns.

Firstly, are these platforms, at this point, able to recognize the difference between coordinated inauthentic behavior and campaign activity or strategy or do we run the risk of people losing accounts because they posted the exact message perhaps to increase its chances of going viral?

Secondly, there is also concern on the level of ambiguity and inconsistency when it comes to enforcing such purges. Many users are concerned that the deletion of accounts such as Donald Trump's Twitter account merely indicate how much power Big Tech has over democracy and why there is need for further regulation to limit such powers. On the part of the companies, there is need for more consistency and transparency in how such actions are arrived at, just like governments

need to be more detailed when it comes to the argument of national security versus internet shutdowns.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of confirmation on the part of the government or the NRM party, the evidence on CIB alongside the decision to shut down the internet indicates a higher level of readiness or tact in how the two used the internet or limited how others used it.

In its reaction to the total internet shutdown that came a day before the election itself, the Human Rights Watch shared the same view. HRW said the *"efficiency of the six-day total shutdown and the stability of government services suggests that the blackout was planned far in advance"*¹⁹.

This indicates that the government, just like a number of others world over, is only getting better at using digital spaces to manipulate and also control the online narrative. Whether this is through the use of fake accounts or the ultimate decision to completely switch off the internet, the Ugandan government recognizes the role and power of the internet and has proven it is keen on exerting its control online, too.

Jacky Kemigisa, a Kampala-based journalist, observed that²⁰ the 2016 presidential election blackout that lasted for three days and affected social media platforms was a "trial and error" stage to gauge compliance. 2021, she added, provided yet another opportunity to tighten the noose on online spaces given their undeniable influence on public opinion, even in a country where only a handful of people access the internet.

The shutdown in itself could be interpreted

¹⁸ WaPo. On eve of election, Facebook says it's investigating 'coordinated inauthentic behavior' by 'foreign entities,' deletes 115 accounts. Accessed March 8, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/11/06/eve-election-facebook-says-its-investigating-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-deletes-accounts/>
¹⁹ HRW. Uganda: Elections marred by violence. January 21, 2021. Accessed March 1, 2021. www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/21/uganda-elections-marred-violence#
²⁰ Ms Kemigisa gave the comments during a phone conversation

as manipulation or at least a last resort when it comes to manipulative efforts. The United Nations considers cutting off users from Internet access, regardless of the justification provided, including on the grounds of violating intellectual property rights law, to be disproportionate and thus a violation of Article 19, Paragraph 3, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It also calls upon all States to ensure that Internet access is maintained at all times, including during times of political unrest.²¹

Switching off the internet alongside efforts such as CIB are becoming the go-to moves for a number of governments and they are getting good at it.

The internet has previously been switched off in Cameroon's English-speaking region. In India, the country experiences shutdowns at state level quite frequently. According to Access Now, 114 shutdowns were recorded in the first six months of 2019 in 23 countries compared to the 196 recorded in the whole of 2018.²²

Access to the internet is increasingly being weaponized as a control tool and the argument often fronted is that restrictions are aimed at ensuring national security, although little to no evidence to support this is ever provided. National security has been cited on the occasion of Uganda's internet shutdowns (2016 and 2021).

According to NetBlocks.org, Uganda lost

UGX39.5 billion²³ during the six days of total internet shutdown. For context, this was nearly as much as the UGX49.5 billion collected as social media tax (Over-the-Top or OTT tax) in the whole of 2019! The social media tax, in place since 2018, has widely been criticized as more of a disruption to the country's efforts to go digital and at the same time creating an unfavorable climate for those who seek to invest and earn from the internet.

Ms Kemigisa adds that since 2016, Uganda has only grown in its efforts towards being a more surveilled state. In fact, two years after the 2016 election, Uganda embarked on the process of installing²⁴ Closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras delivered by Huawei, a Chinese firm.

In its continued attempt to control the narrative both online and offline, Ugandan laws have increasingly readied the regime to crack down on anti-government activists both at home and abroad. More recently, the government set up an Electronic Counter Measure Unit (ECMU) under the Uganda Police Force²⁵ to detect and investigate crimes committed using online platforms including Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Such surveillance, particularly the kind provided by China's Huawei, risks thinning citizen trust and confidence in systems.

Such measures align with the high-profile case in which Dr Stella Nyanzi, a vocal critic of the Museveni regime was prosecuted and jailed after writing a provocative and explicit poem on her Facebook page.²⁶

²¹ https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf

²² *The State of Internet Shutdowns around the World: The 2018 #KeepItOn Report* <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2019/06/KIO-Report-final.pdf>

²³ NetBlocks. *Social media and messaging restricted, internet shut down for Uganda elections*. Accessed February 25. <https://netblocks.org/reports/social-media-and-messaging-platforms-restricted-in-uganda-ahead-of-general-election-XB7aa087>

²⁴ Daily Monitor. *CCTV cameras finally arrive*. Accessed February 26, 2021. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/cctv-cameras-finally-arrive-1771740>

²⁵ Uganda Police. *The Electronic Crime Counter Measure Unit*. Accessed March 5, 2021. <https://www.unwantedwitness.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Electronic-Counter-Measure-Unit.pdf>

²⁶ <https://web.facebook.com/stella.nyanzi/posts/10156527462740053>

The anthropologist was charged with the offence of cyberharassment contrary to section 24(1), (2) (a) of the Computer Misuse Act, 2011. Court ruled that Dr. Nyanzi's comments over the internet *"disturbed the peace, quiet or right to privacy of his excellency the President of Uganda Yoweri Kaguta Museveni with no purpose of legitimate communication..."* Dr. Nyanzi was released from prison after serving an 18-month sentence.

On appeal, the high court found that Dr Nyanzi's right to a fair trial was violated by the lower magistrates' court which denied her the right to identify, prepare and call defense witnesses. The case is one anecdote pointing to the shrinking online space.

Apart from the creation of fake accounts, a PR firm and a news website were also implicated by the DFRLab investigation.

Respectively, Robusto Communications Co Ltd and Kampala Times Media Limited –two private companies incorporated in Uganda in 2019, amplified pro-Museveni messages. The PR firm's now-deleted Twitter account, @RobustoUg, often retweeted Mr. Museveni and his supporters tweets or posted links to the Kampala Times website –kampalaitimesug.com, which was created in August 21, 2020.

According to DFRLab, *"although the website was created in August 2020, the Facebook page for the company was created on May 29 of that year, soon followed by its Twitter account @KampalaTimes_ on June 5. The first post to the Kampala Times Facebook page was a profile picture with information about Robusto Communications, indicating a clear connection between the two companies"*.

Such links support the theory on coordinated inauthentic behavior aimed at shaping and

perhaps distorting online conversation. Both the PR firm and the news aggregator website were part of an online ecosystem that straddled Facebook and Twitter with a sole purpose of tactfully swaying online conversation. DFRLab further found that eight accounts involved in the Twitter network also had corresponding Facebook profiles focused on sharing content from both Kampala Times and Robusto Communications, as well as amplifying pro-Museveni content.

Furthermore, CIB is capable of creating the sort of echo chambers that contributed to the election of Donald Trump in 2016, a year when over 60%²⁷ of adult U.S. citizens told a Pew Research study that they relied on social media for their news. The echo chamber effect *"occurs online when a harmonious group of people amalgamate and develop tunnel vision. Participants in online discussions may find their opinions constantly echoed back to them, which reinforces their individual belief systems due to the declining exposure to other's opinions*. In the Ugandan context, on one hand you have a news website publishing stories that purposely frame one candidate in positive light while on the other you have a PR firm and several Facebook and Twitter accounts sharing that site's links, hence creating an ecosystem that promotes one narrative.

While it is nearly impossible to accurately gauge the extent to which CIB influenced the election's outcome(s), acknowledging the likelihood that such activity is capable of shaping or upholding certain narratives somewhat proves the case that digital voter manipulation might have occurred, even in subtle form.

²⁷ Pew. *News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016*. Accessed March 5, 2021. <https://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>



Source: Logan Weaver, www.unsplash.com

02

Manipulating the Narrative

As pointed out earlier, while digital spaces remain a privilege enjoyed by a few Ugandans, they are indeed the latest frontier where the battle to control the narrative is playing out. During the 2021 General Election cycle, we saw subtler forms of manipulation, especially in how certain narratives were framed.

One way of examining this sort of manipulation is in the language by key newsmakers, notably Mr. Museveni. In November 2020, the arrest of Bobi Wine sparked nationwide protests²⁸, prompting security forces to open fire. Over 40 people, many unarmed passersby, were killed. The worrisome developments that followed the arrests and murders played out offline and online. When he finally broke his silence on the dead, the president used the word “terrorists” to refer to the protestors. He has used the word on several subsequent occasions.

Given the role social media played in disseminating information around the 2021 election, manipulation can be gauged in less obvious forms like the insistence of a commander-in-chief not to admit that security forces were guilty of highhandedness in the way they dealt with the protests. By referring to victims as “terrorists”, those responsible for their deaths are somewhat sanitized.



Because of misbehaviour and plans to stop the elections, the security forces deployed heavily. In the case of Kampala, we brought in a commando unit that had been exemplary in Somalia. They killed a few terrorists who were here - President Museveni

#NTVNews #M7Address



20:45 · 13 Feb 21 · SocialNewsDesk

But again, social media provides an opportunity for the citizenry to counter such attempts to manipulate how events are framed or interpreted. Notice how the Twitter user in the screenshot below uses the same word to define plain-clothes armed security operatives photographed in action during the post-Bobi arrest protests.

²⁸BBC. Bobi Wine: Presidential rival's arrest sparks deadly Uganda protests. Accessed February 20, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55006561>



Tweets like this support the argument that in real time, digital spaces provide citizens with options to counter narratives and inadvertently rejected manipulation of this sort.

But there were also instances where the opposition supporters embellished and as a result, manipulated the narrative. Take the digitally enhanced photo of Mr. Museveni used in the screenshot below. In the tweet that features among others, the #WeAreRemovingADictator hashtag, the septuagenarian's eyes have been reddened and he appears older than his most recent photos.

The red eyes and enhanced older look fit the common frame that Mr. Museveni is a dangerous ageing dictator. Whether he is or is not doesn't take away the fact that the point was communicated using a clearly manipulated photo.



In another example, to further support the claim of a genocide in Uganda, it was common to see tweets featuring photos from the Rwandan genocide of 1994 or other incidents from elsewhere.

The tweet below features photos of some of the people killed in the November 2020 protests that followed the arrest of Bobi Wine. At the same time, the author of this tweet included photos from the Rwandan genocide without making a distinction.



Martin Luther Grandson
@GrandsonLuther

Replying to @SamsonKasumba and @nbstv

The World continues to abandon innocent Ugandans being murdered by the Junta. Without Justice to innocent citizens there can't be peace. Uganda is bleeding. No justice => No peace. Peace in Uganda right now means the Justice of Rest In Peace (RIP)



21:16 · 05 Feb 21 · Twitter for Android

By extending manipulation to include subtler examples like these, one must also make a distinction between disinformation and misinformation. Yes, including a photo from an unrelated event to highlight the seriousness of the situation at hand is manipulation, but is it the same as when a government invests actual state resources to push a certain narrative online? Definitely not.

Disinformation²⁹ is false or misleading information spread deliberately by a state to deceive. The word "disinformation" traces its origins to the Russian word 'dezinformatsiya' which is derived from a Russian propaganda department. Disinformation was defined in

the Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1952) as "*false information with the intention to deceive public opinion*". A government insisting unarmed protestors were "terrorists" is disinformation.

On the other hand, misinformation is "*false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead*".³⁰ Like that tweet above that features the photos from the Rwandan genocide. It is possible that the author of the tweet is unaware of the actual origin of the photo(s) or they are, but feel that adding that photo to those of actual victims of the protests makes the point louder.

Misinformation is the product of our humanity. To err is human. We forget or mishear or misremember. Spreading information that is wrong without you knowing it is wrong is spreading misinformation. As we rely on digital tools more and more, misinformation will always be with us. This is why factchecking in the post-Trump era of so-called alternative facts has become a renewed endeavor for many media outlets world over.

While misinformation is somewhat seen as less dangerous, compared to state-funded propaganda or disinformation, examples from India where seemingly harmless WhatsApp-circulated fake news inspired a mob to lynch five migrant workers³¹, highlight the potential danger in misinformation or stoking tribal/genocidal sentiment. Such incidents highlight the need to recognize the threat posed by fake news to the stability of communities.

In the case of Uganda, there is need to raise more awareness on the actual potential danger of spreading misinformation and or disinformation and investment of resources towards curbing the two.

²⁹ Ion Mihai Pacepa and Ronald J. Rychlak (2013), *Disinformation: Former Spy Chief Reveals Secret Strategies for Undermining Freedom, Attacking Religion, and Promoting Terrorism*, WND Books, pp. 4–6, 34–39, 75, ISBN 978-1-936488-60-5

³⁰ Dictionary.com. "Misinformation" vs. "Disinformation": Get Informed On The Difference. Accessed March 6, 2021. <https://www.dictionary.com/e/misinformation-vs-disinformation-get-informed-on-the-difference/>

³¹ DW. India fake news problem fueled by digital illiteracy. Accessed March 8, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/india-fake-news-problem-fueled-by-digital-illiteracy/a-56746776>



Source: William Fortunato, www.pexels.com

03

Outside Influence

Human Rights Watch described the Ugandan government as better prepared for the 2021 internet shutdown, suggesting reliance on foreign powers to ensure success.

One such foreign player is China. A 2019 Oxford Internet Institute report³² described China as a “major player in the global disinformation order”. China however is a preferred ally for leaders like President Museveni who have continued to fall out with the West and see the world’s second largest economy as a better friend who doesn’t ask questions about human rights violations.

China remains one of the most surveilled and censored countries and over the last couple of years, through state-supported companies like Huawei, has been on a charm offensive to extend these surveilling practices to other countries, Uganda included. It is not easy to establish to what extent China readied Uganda for the shutdown but since 2016, Huawei has been a provider for street CCTV cameras³³ and relevant software, putting Uganda on the path towards more surveillance.

It has also been reported that Ugandan authorities relied on Chinese-bought facial recognition and digital surveillance tools from companies like Huawei³⁴ and Cloudwalk to identify protestors.

AA December 2020 report³⁵ titled ‘*Running In Circles: Uncovering the Clients of Cyberespionage Firm Circles*’, found that Uganda was one of the countries using an Israeli surveillance spyware to spy on opposition figures, journalists and protestors. Others named in the report by the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab include Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, Morocco and Zambia.

Circles, the firm implicated in the report, is claimed to have linkages with Tel Aviv-based NSO Group, which became globally known in 2019 for the Pegasus spyware scandal after it was reported to have been used to exploit a vulnerability in the popular WhatsApp app to spy on opposition organizers in several countries.

Unlike the 2016 American election that saw unsolicited foreign meddling online by Russia³⁶, “outside” in the case of Uganda and other African countries is largely at the invitation of the sitting government and the intention is always to surveil and curtail. But without government corroboration, it is hard to establish to what extent such interactions

32 The Global Disinformation Order. Samantha B., Philip H. Accessed March 8, 2021 <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/Cyber-Troop-Report19.pdf>

33 Daily Monitor. CCTV cameras finally arrive. Accessed February 26, 2021. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/cctv-cameras-finally-arrive-1771740>

34 Quartz. Uganda is using Huawei’s facial recognition tech to crack down on dissent after anti-government protests. Accessed March 6, 2021. <https://qz.com/africa/1938976/uganda-uses-chinas-huawei-facial-recognition-to-snare-protesters/>

35 Quartz. More African countries are relying on an Israeli surveillance tool to snoop on private citizens. Accessed February 24, 2021. <https://qz.com/africa/1940897/nigeria-kenya-use-israeli-surveillance-tool-to-listen-to-calls/>

36 Schick, Nina (2020). *Deep Fakes and the Infocalypse*. United Kingdom: Monoray. pp. 60–75. ISBN 978-1-913183-52-3.

with other state actors influenced the election or manipulated digital spaces. Reticence on the part of the government on how foreign players are involved in surveillance and manipulative measures bring into question moves such as the shutdown that are often qualified on national security grounds.

The southeastern Asian nation of Myanmar is a perfect anecdote to balance the argument. Back in 2018, Facebook³⁷ was forced to come up with bespoke measures aimed at curbing the spread of fake news on its platform. Like in many countries, majority of social media users in the country rely on Facebook for their daily media content. In the wake of the military coup that saw Aung San Suu Kyi arrested and detained for importing walkie talkies, Facebook alongside its other subsidiaries- Instagram and WhatsApp were blocked to ensure stability.

Facebook attracted more users in Myanmar by initially allowing its app to be used without incurring data charges. Since its 2010 entry in the country, the platform has increasingly contributed to violence by way of fake

news. In fact, a team of UN human rights investigators concluded that hate speech carried on Facebook indeed played a key role in fomenting violence in the country. On its part, Facebook admitted it had failed to prevent its platform from being used to incite offline violence in Myanmar.

Myanmar provides a good example that further captures the need for a conversation on how to keep these online spaces democratic without threatening national security or using it as an excuse to muzzle them.

The global online society is yet to arrive at straight answers on regulation. The Myanmar example further builds a case for more transparency and perhaps involvement (or at least prior engagement) of the citizenry before decisions such as shutdowns or reliance on foreign actors are made.

³⁷BBC. Myanmar coup: How Facebook became the 'digital tea shop'. Accessed February 14, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55929654>



Source: Daddy Mohlala, www.unsplash.com

04

Social Media as an Equaliser

The role digital spaces played in the 2021 Ugandan election extends to how citizens used it to organize and also debunk disinformation / misinformation. As governments tighten their grip on the internet's reins and shutdowns become part of daily life, the rise of the citizen journalist is perhaps the greatest counter response.

Government actions are pushing more people into becoming vocal about the politics of the day. As a result, we are seeing the rise of citizen journalism which, despite the internet shutdown, grew into actual organizing with success stories including the #BoycottMTVMAMAs³⁸ campaign. The MTV Africa Music Awards (*also known as the MAMAs*), established in 2008 by MTV Networks Africa (*now Viacom International Media Networks Africa*) to recognize the finest in contemporary African music, were slated to take place on February 20, 2021 in Kampala.

However, many used #BoycottMTVMAMAs to highlight several reasons why it was tone deaf for the organisers to go ahead with the event, including the most ironic of them all; that a global music event was slated to virtually take place in the same country where the internet was partially off (*at the time, the total shutdown had been lifted but users needed VPNs to access most platforms, including video streaming platform, YouTube*).

For many citizen journalists, it was a wrong time for Uganda to play host to such an event when several people, including artistes such as Nubian Lee, were in detention amid reports of more arbitrary arrests and detention. In the end, the ceremony was postponed indefinitely.

More and more Ugandans are using their digital spaces to speak out and reject manipulation of narratives through tactics such as CIB or fake news.

In another example on how citizens used digital platforms to reject disinformation/misinformation, riding on the ethnocentric sentiments that found their way into the rhetoric online, a fake map emerged indicating that western Uganda, the region where the president and many of the ruling class members hail from, had more MP positions than any other region.

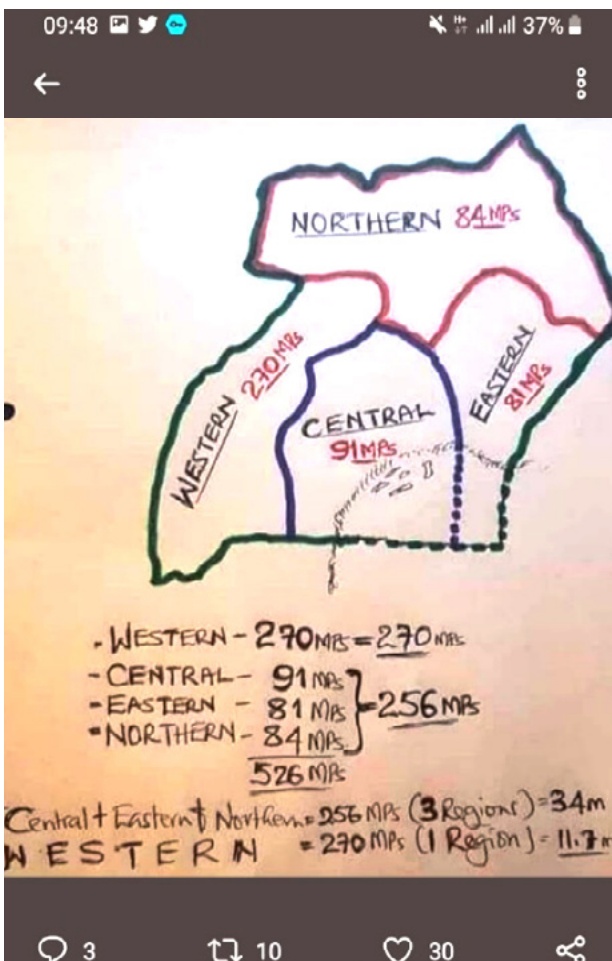
The map quickly spread online but unlike instances where pro-government accounts spread fake news and stuck to their guns, many citizen journalists pointed out that the map in question was fake.

In a country where many government organizations are headed by people from western Uganda (*in 2020, an MP tabled a bill that seeks to remedy this evident imbalance*)³⁹, it was easy to believe the map if one was not keen on the fact that in Uganda, MPs are not elected to represent a region.

The map gave central Uganda just 91 MPs, echoing common sentiment that the Baganda who hail from the region have been disenfranchised by the “westerners”.

³⁸ Quartz. *The MTV Africa Music awards are the latest casualties of Uganda's post-election fallout*. Accessed March 4, 2021. <https://qz.com/africa/1969656/mtv-africa-music-awards-cancelled-in-uganda-election-aftermath/>

³⁹ Parliament of Uganda. *Bill to address regional imbalance tabled*. Accessed March 7, 2021. <https://www.parliament.go.ug/news/4739/bill-address-regional-imbalance-tabled>



According to the Ugandan Parliament website⁴⁰, it is in fact eastern Uganda that had the biggest share of seats in the 10th Parliament with 144 representatives from the region; central (102), north (124), west (132).

The above example highlights how it is easy to manipulate people by relying on their own fears and the narratives they have been led to believe. The fake map just emerged online and had it not been for keener users, it would have spread even further.

In another notable example of citizen journalism, several users took it upon themselves to forensically examine the accuracy of the results the Electoral Commission relied on to declare Mr. Museveni the winner of the January 2021 election.

The hashtag #ECResultsAnalysis features several discrepancies in the data published on the EC website.

Citizen journalism is a viable remedy to digital manipulation but it still succumbs to the absolute powers the state holds. In Uganda, the total internet blackout meant no one was able to tweet or update their Facebook timelines. Governments still hold immense power over the internet and given that they can turn off its gateways without as much as a warning makes the case for further liberalization of such powers to ensure that no one player has such power to arbitrarily switch off especially with as little evidence to justify such moves.

Invention of platforms such as the U-Vote app⁴² by the National Unity Platform is one example on how citizen journalism was expected to shape the election even further. The total internet shutdown rendered such citizen-led election monitoring efforts futile, indicating how digital spaces are viewed as threats to the status quo and why governments are keen on controlling what happens there.

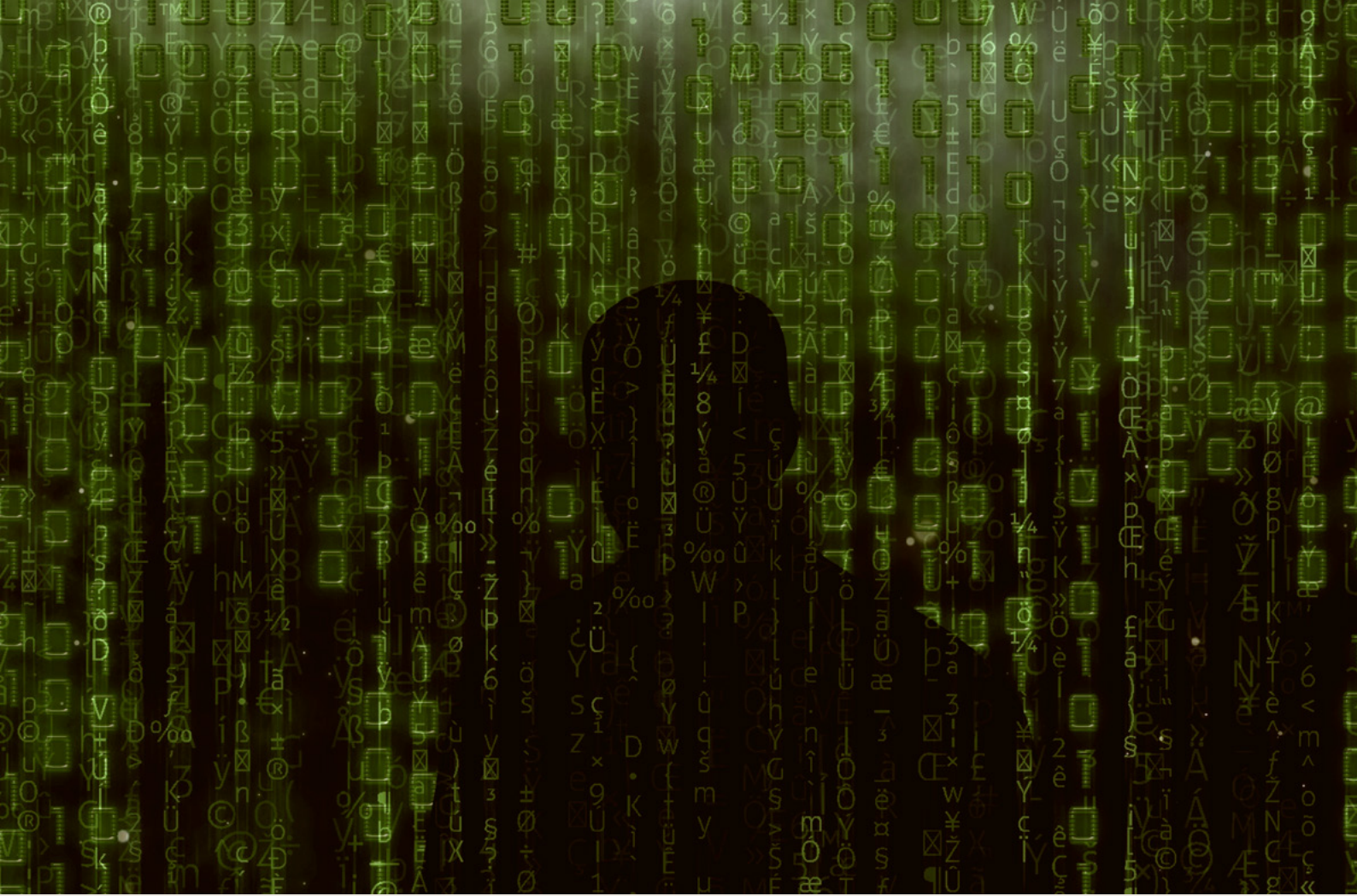
Nevertheless, as soon as the internet was restored, even partially, many citizen journalists, as though in response to the attempt to silence them, merely continued where they had left off, sharing several photos and videos of what transpired during the blackout.

Ordinary internet users will continue to play a great role in countering manipulation but governments still hold the last say on whether the spaces where they can do this exist in the first place. The internet needs to remain a safe space for citizen journalism.

40 Find an MP. Parliament of Uganda. <https://www.parliament.go.ug/find-an-mp>

41 Freedom House. Social media are a growing conduit for electoral manipulation and mass surveillance. Accessed March 8, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/social-media-are-growing-conduit-electoral-manipulation-and-mass-surveillance>

42 PC Tech. NUP Presidential Candidate, Robert Kyagulanyi Launches Election Monitoring App. Accessed February 12, 2021. <https://pctechmag.com/2021/01/robert-kyagulanyi-launches-uvote-app/>



Source: tigerlilly713, www.pixabay.com

05

The Future of Digital Voter Manipulation and Elections

The 2013 Facebook-Cambridge Analytica (CA) data scandal revealed how non-state actors like Big Tech and smaller entities like a previously little-known now-defunct consulting firm are likely to influence elections in the future that is now. In one of the largest data breaches, it emerged that the British firm had used an app called “This Is Your Digital Life” to harvest data of up to 87 million Facebook profiles without their owners’ knowledge⁴³.

As the scandal unfolded, it sparked global outcry and even, for a long minute there, fueled the online movement, #DeleteFacebook. In the finer details that emerged over time, it became clear that CA had, riding on the data collected, worked on several campaigns from Russia to Brexit, the United States and even neighbouring Kenya.

In Kenya for example, CA is accused of attempting to “subvert the people’s will” after it emerged that President Uhuru Kenyatta had hired it ahead of the country’s 2013 general election⁴⁴. The claims were supported by footage secretly obtained by a British TV investigative programme in which CA bosses were heard on camera boasting about the control they exerted in Kenya during that election.

While CA folded operations in 2018, the extent to which it was able to operate for years in a number of countries and at the invitation of some of the highest levels of leadership, all while pushing the edges of what is legal, is arguably the juiciest anecdote on how data will likely influence elections going forward, even in countries like Uganda, just like much of Africa, where internet penetration is still playing catch up with the rest of the world.

Although there is no evidence to suggest that Robusto Communications Co. Ltd., the Ugandan firm implicated in the DFRLab investigation participated in manipulation at the same level as CA, it is a small detail that forecasts who the players in the future of elections in Uganda might be.

It can only be expected that the future will only see more companies like CA or Robusto, playing a bigger role by offering data services to politicians keen on not merely trending hashtags but rather, understanding the dynamics of elections by examining user data and using that information to better reach or even manipulate voters digitally.

While CA is no more, its legacy still stands and lives on in the likes of Robusto who, in the name of cementing their relevance, will only get better at the game.

As a result, the future will most likely see more companies like Robusto play a bigger role in elections. The 2021 Ugandan elections gave many political campaigns their first experience with online engagement. We are more likely to see this trend continue as political camps take extra steps to ensure that they better harness the power of digital spaces where more of the electorate are only bound to join. This is partly

⁴³ Meredith, Sam (April 10, 2018). “Facebook-Cambridge Analytica: A timeline of the data hijacking scandal”. CNBC. Retrieved March 8, 2021.

⁴⁴ BBC. Cambridge Analytica’s Kenya election role ‘must be investigated’. Accessed March 8, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43471707>

because much of Africa is expected to be the next frontier for the mobile and internet boom.

According to GSMA⁴⁵, an industry Organisation that represents mobile network operators worldwide, it is projected that sub-Saharan Africa will have over 130 million new mobile users by 2025 and nearly half of these will come from Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, DRC and Ethiopia.

About 49% of the African population are still not connected to the mobile internet and the price of the internet and smartphones are current obstacles. Nevertheless, GSMA projects that smartphone adoption will only keep rising as more Africans afford the gadgets and that the speed at which this adoption will happen will be 65% by 2025. Partnerships between the likes of Google and African players like Safaricom as well as the more recent news that Liquid Telecom, one of Africa's largest internet providers, raised⁴⁶ over \$620 million in capital in 2021 provide evidence that the road towards a more internet savvy Africa will only get clearer, making the work of companies that offer services like CA's even more necessary as politicians and governments in Africa will be more keen to make sense of the data. Data breaches might also become part of daily life as more Africans join the internet.

And given that the future is largely more visual, a 2018 Deloitte study forecasts⁴⁷ that in one likely scenario, large digital platforms like Facebook that continue to invest millions

in making video our more preferred kind of content will dominate the global market in all parts of the value chain.

The ground for more visual political campaigns was particularly laid during the 2013 Kenyan election in which Cambridge Analytica played a role in Mr. Kenyatta's campaign. CA's work in Kenya revealed how data can be used to create bespoke content targeting different groups in the population. Cambridge Analytica's methods involved working with a local research partner "to ensure that variations in language and customs were respected." The outcome targeted young voters via social media. Some users were particularly targeted by videos whose authors remained largely anonymous. The messages in some of the videos rode on the tribal sentiment that shapes much of Kenyan politics to paint a doomsday scenario if Mr. Kenyatta's main rival in the election, ex-prime minister Raila Odinga won the election.

With doctored video or deep fakes a reality already, more internet adaptability will only make voters more prone to targeted visual campaigns that can weaponise fears and existing narratives. While software to create such fakes has existed for a while, artificial intelligence (AI) makes the whole process easier today.

In 2018, the world's attention was drawn to deep fakes when American director and actor Jordan Peele teamed up with BuzzFeed to make an awareness video⁴⁹ in which Barack Obama was ventriloquized to, among others,

45 GSMA. *Mobile Economy: Sub-Saharan Africa*. Accessed March 9, 2021. <https://www.gsma.com/mobileeconomy/sub-saharan-africa/>

46 Quartz. *Internet connectivity in Africa just got a major boost*. Accessed March 9, 2021. <https://qz.com/africa/1980024/liquid-telecoms-bond-sale-aims-to-boost-african-internet-access/>

47 Deloitte. *The future of video: what will we watch in 2030, and how?* Accessed March 9, 2021. <https://www2.deloitte.com/be/en/pages/technology-media-and-telecommunications/articles/future-of-tv-video-press-release.html>

48 CNBC. *Here's how Cambridge Analytica played a dominant role in Kenya's chaotic 2017 elections*. Accessed March 4, 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/23/cambridge-analytica-and-its-role-in-kenya-2017-elections.html>

49 BuzzFeed. *You Won't Believe What Obama Says In This Video*. Rewatched March 8, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ54GDm1eL0>

call Donald Trump “*a total and complete dipshit*”. The real Barack Obama would never make such utterances (at least not publicly).

As technologist Aviv Ovadya summed⁵⁰ it up, “What happens when anyone can make it appear as if anything has happened, regardless of whether or not it did?”

In the case of Donald Trump's election in 2016, there is also evidence that reliance on big data works. Whether Africa is ready for data driven election is a question only time will best answer.

Campaign advertising is also likely to become more apparent online, especially now that digital spaces have been tested and proven to be powerful barnstorming tools for the future. In politics, campaign advertising is the use of an advertising campaign through the media to influence a political debate, and ultimately, voters. These ads are designed by political consultants and political campaign staff. Many countries restrict the use of broadcast media to broadcast political messaging. In the European Union, many countries do not permit paid-for political TV or radio advertising for fear that wealthy groups will gain control of airtime, making fair play impossible and distorting the political debate in the process.

Currently, countries such as the UK and Ireland forbid paid advertisements, though political

parties are allowed a small number of political broadcasts in the run up to election time. The United States has a very free market for broadcast political messaging. Canada allows paid-for political broadcasts but requires equitable access to the airwaves. In countries like Uganda, the internet provides politicians an option to circumvent such restrictions that are more likely to affect traditional mediums like TV and radio instead of the internet which remains the Wild West.

The future promises more ground for manipulation both at state level but also at individual levels. Take deep fakes for example. Software that enables users to create such content is getting better and even cheaper (in some cases even free). This means anyone can take it upon themselves to create a viral video that could sway an entire election. That is why governments and citizens need to be equipped to better prepare for a future where anything can be manipulated to suit a given narrative.

There is also need for regulations aimed at curbing the role players such as Robusto might play. As BBC journalist Larry Madowo wrote⁵¹ in 2018, “*No one company should have the power to manipulate the psychology of an entire country.*” Not Facebook or a smaller company like Robusto.

⁵⁰ James V. The Verge. Watch Jordan Peele use AI to make Barack Obama deliver a PSA about fake news. Accessed March 7, 2021. <https://www.theverge.com/tldr/2018/4/17/17247334/ai-fake-news-video-barack-obama-jordan-peele-buzzfeed>

⁵¹ Madowo L. WaPo. How Cambridge Analytica poisoned Kenya's democracy. Accessed March 8, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/03/20/how-cambridge-analytica-poisoned-kenyas-democracy/>



Source: [Muhamadtaha Ibrahim Ma'aji, www.unsplash.com](https://www.unsplash.com)

05

Conclusion

It is easy to conclude that the digital voter manipulation discussed above impacted the outcome of the Ugandan 2021 General Election to a lesser extent on account that the internet and digital spaces like Facebook and Twitter are accessed by a handful of Ugandans in a country where politics is largely influenced by other factors other than the internet.

Nevertheless, evidence on coordinated internet behavior (CIB) as provided by Facebook and Twitter indicate an awareness on the part of Kampala that the internet cannot be ignored.

The internet is the latest frontier of control and as data continues to become the currency of the future, government involvement in efforts to manipulate the online discourse will only get more buttressed. Like all other players, governments are quickly realizing the internet's role, especially in championing democracy and are actively involved in latest tactics aimed at achieving as much control as possible.

While it is virtually impossible to accurately establish how digital voter manipulation directly impacted the outcome of the 2021 election, it is clear that digital platforms will only play greater roles in future Ugandan elections.

While there is hope from the role played by ordinary users or citizen journalists, it is still in governments' capacity to decide to which extent to control the internet. Actions such as the introduction of social media tax or the coordinated internet behavior put them in crosshairs with social media companies and

threatens the digital space. Shutdowns distort the vital access to and dissemination of much needed information. They are also costly and make a country less favorable for internet-driven investment.

In the case of Uganda, they further put users at the risk⁵² of third-party players given that internet shutdowns force people to rely on Virtual Private Networks. VPNs pose cybersecurity risks as users are likely to download the free versions, handing personal data to largely unknown third parties. Additionally, VPNs operate on the promise of covert browsing which means it becomes hard to establish accurate national internet data figures. Users have also complained that some VPNs consume more data, making the online experience costlier.

For a young population like Uganda where over 70 percent of the citizens is below the age of 30, such disruptions slow the rate of internet adaptability while making Uganda a less favorable investment destination compared to countries like⁵³ Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria which receive the lion's share of all tech funding.

More reliable and cheap internet spurs the growth of a digital economy; more users

⁵² VPN Mentor. *Are VPNs Safe? Some Aren't (And It's Not Only the Free Ones)*. Accessed February 4, 2021. <https://www.vpnmentor.com/blog/free-vpns-are-not-safe-to-use/>

⁵³ Harvard Business Review. *How Technology Could Promote Growth in 6 African Countries*. Accessed March 6, 2021. <https://hbr.org/2019/12/research-how-technology-could-promote-growth-in-6-african-countries>

equals to more data which in turn leads to smarter algorithms and more sellers hence more revenue and taxes. Given the internet's potential for being a vehicle to economic transformation⁵⁴, random internet shutdowns, anti-internet laws, and taxes like the social media tax disrupt the flow of business. All these, on top of denying citizens a chance to access information and air their views freely.

On the other hand, manipulation as discussed here calls for more focus and resources towards fact-checking and increasing user awareness of how fake news can be presented. Journalists just like the ordinary user need to be made more aware of the impact fake news poses and how to identify and stop it.

Governments also need to recognize that the internet is not an enemy but rather, an enabler of growth and any efforts that get in the way of this are not worthwhile. The argument of national security which is often tabled as the major reason behind shutdowns is manipulative without further evidence. And this is not to say governments shouldn't take decisions in the name of protecting citizens. But when digital authoritarian actions are taken without clearer evidence on whether the threat matches the decision (in this case the shutdown), such moves can only be interpreted as a last resort where attempts to manipulate fail to completely sway the online narrative in the government's desired direction.

Also, worth noting is the growing influence social media platform companies have over the internet and why conversations on how best to regulate such influence must happen in the same spaces arguing for further liberalization of the internet. These companies control the algorithms that decide what we see and what we don't see. In the end, the companies are perhaps as powerful as the governments fighting them. Should Twitter or Facebook have all the power to dictate who stays and who goes? Even how such decisions are arrived at ought to be clearer to encourage more transparency.

More importantly, the Ugandan government ought to adopt an end-user driven approach towards how it handles the internet. As opposed to a top-down style seen with the passing of the social media tax which has only crippled the ICT sector, citizens ought to be involved in the decisions their government is taking in regards to the internet.

Digital voter manipulation is only expected to get worse and this is why all users of these spaces must share the common goal of keeping them healthy and safe, instead of further regulation.

⁵⁴ Google. e-Conomy Africa 2020: Africa's \$180 billion internet economy future. <https://kstatic.googleusercontent.com/files/ad1166fd6e3289b5e6445c-73e4cff5bbb9df1927d35cff4f4b5efa8ebb4fe16620d5ddb499d17956ea850bcac8f6d05faf1c2f1ca7f558bf1296b5303958f334>

