Social Media and Elections in Africa: A curse or a blessing?

Nic Cheeseman
Professor of Democracy, University of Birmingham
with Jonathan Fisher, Jamie Hitchins, Idayat Hassan & Gabrielle Lynch

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Is social media undermining democracy? Evidence from Africa

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The social media debate

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The social media debate

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Threat to democracy

Conditional (control)

Inherent
The media ecosystem
How often do you get news from the following sources:

- Radio
- Television
- Print newspapers
- Internet
- Social media

- Never
- Less than once a month
- A few times a month
- A few times a week
- Every day

Afrobarometer Round 8, 2019
Where do you get most of your information about politics from?

- Directly from politicians
- Newspapers
- TV
- Radio
- WhatsApp
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Family and friends
- Traditional leaders
- Religious leaders
- Blogs and websites
- Online only newspapers
- Video sharing platforms

South Consulting Omnibus Survey, 2021
Where do you get most of your information about politics from?

South Consulting Omnibus Survey, 2021
How often do you use the Internet?

Afrobarometer Round 8, 2019
How much do you trust these different sources of information about politics?

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In Kenya, how often do you think people from the following groups spread information they know to be false?

Afrobarometer Round 8, 2019
In Kenya, how often do you think people from the following groups spread information they know to be false?

- Government officials
- Politicians and political parties
- News media & journalists
- Social media users
- Activists & interest groups

Afrobarometer Round 8, 2019
What is happening in Kenya?

Key context: ICC prosecutions and domestic vigilance

- Official Twitter and Facebook pages relatively banal
- Most prominent political leaders deploy carefully curated messages
- Limited interaction with senior figures
- More controversial messages generally left to downstream candidates
What is happening in Kenya?

Three main sources of divisive messages/fake news/hate speech:

1. Consultants and informal “working groups” used to prepare attack ads and misinformation

2. “Ethnic WhatsApp” groups generate misinformation

3. Local level individuals seeking to gain traction/notoriety

→ Little third-party manipulation thus far
We need to talk about WhatsApp
WhatsApp most popular messaging act in over 40 African countries

Fear of prosecution pushes a higher proportion of fake news to WhatsApp and Telegram in Kenya

These are the platforms we know least about …
“WhatsApp is a disruptive technology that challenges existing hierarchies in ways that are simultaneously emancipatory and destructive, strengthening and undermining democratic consolidation at the same time. The challenge is therefore to understand both aspects of WhatsApp’s impact and the ways in which they interact.”
WHATSAPP AND NIGERIA'S 2019 ELECTIONS: MOBILISING THE PEOPLE, PROTECTING THE VOTE

Authors:
Jamie Hitchen (independent),
Idayat Hassan
(Centre for Democracy and Development),
Dr Jonathan Fisher
(University of Birmingham),
Professor Nic Cheeseman
(University of Birmingham)
How is WhatsApp used?

1. “Organic” nature of WhatsApp is overplayed.

2. In reality, it often depends on the pre-existence of social (religious/university) and political (party) institutions.

3. WhatsApp helps, but the ground campaign wins.
Number of WhatsApp groups respondents were members of
Average number of WhatsApp group members

- Less than 50: 27.0%
- 50 or more: 73.0%
Evolution not revolution.
When does fake news work?
1. Many “fake” stories are shared, but few “take off”.

2. The most successful stories contained elements of truth or played on popular tropes.

3. Little evidence fake news changes votes, but it can change perceptions.

4. Government disinformation facilitates “fake news”.
One of the questions that came up today in my meeting with Nigerians in Poland was on the issue of whether I've been cloned or not. The ignorant rumors are not surprising — when I was away on medical vacation last year a lot of people hoped I was dead.

We didn't say you're cloned, but you're an impersonator, your nam is Jubril Aminu al- sudani .... You're from Sudan, they performed a plastic surgery on you and paid you $250 USD to impersonate buhari.... Your cup is already full. You will soon route in Jail.
Democratic disruption
1. Opposition leaders often say that WhatsApp has opened media up.

2. Fake news can be countered quickly – in contrast to newspapers and TV.

3. The low cost involved also levels the playing field.

4. Few if any of those involved favour greater censorship.
1. The use of “propaganda secretaries is an access point for youth into political process

2. In Kano, women who previously struggled to engage in debates share ideas over WhatsApp

3. Journalists can talk more safely to informants

4. Election observers/civil society use encrypted apps to mobilise
1. Social media is a disruptive force with democratic + undemocratic effects.

2. These are not fully separable: two sides of the same coin.

3. “Taming” such platforms with censorship will curtail both positive and negative effects.

4. Overall impact of WhatsApp depends on context.
Stay in touch

@fromagehomme

n.cheeseman@bham.ac.uk

www.democracyinafrica.org