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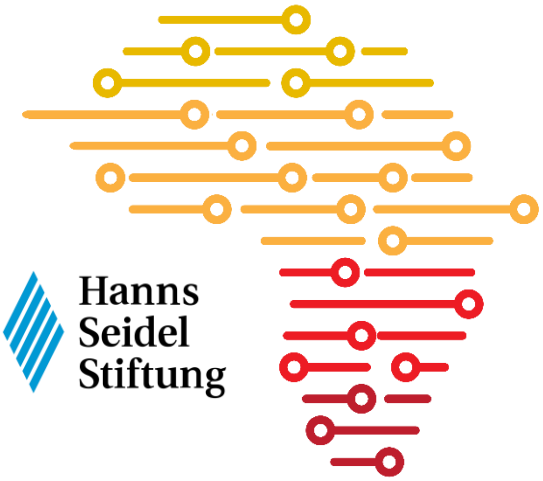
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Politicians on digital platforms: A resource or a threat?

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Abstract

Political discourse in Africa has historically been a one-sided affair: a monologue whereby politicians speak to the electorate in a political rally context. Digital platforms have changed that narrative, providing opportunities for genuine two-way discourse. In an environment where politicians are often demi-gods, armed with only a smart phone, even residents of remote areas are now able to reach local and national level politicians and institutions via social media. With the proliferation of the mobile phone and social media usage on the rise in Africa, there has never been a better opportunity for more robust political debate, and more importantly, an increasingly people-centered and needs-driven public policy agenda. Is this the reality though? Unfortunately, the prevalence of disinformation presents a significant challenge with respect to false narratives perpetuated online, and hence relations between politicians and the electorate. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the extent to which access to politicians through digital platforms has resulted in improved policy, legislation, or service delivery. Furthermore, it interrogates the threats disinformation poses to relations between politicians and the electorate.

Background

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TicToc are some of the more popular social media networks today. From a global perspective, according to the Digital 2022 Global Overview Report, 58.4% of the total global population (4.6 billion people) are social media users. In East Africa, 10% of the population are social media users, compared to 45% in Southern Africa, 16% in West Africa and 56% in North Africa (DataReportal, 2022). In Kenya, 20% of the population are active social media users – double the East African average (DataReportal, 2022).

Kenya boasts a rapidly growing and sophisticated digital space; so much so that the country has come to be known as 'the Silicon Savannah'. Social media has an outsized part in this growth: hosting social gatherings, as a place where people research everything from what is trending to possible travel destinations, and even as a growing source of news and political banter. From January 2020 to January 2021, Kenya experienced a 25% growth in active social media users (DataReportal Kenya, 2022). Such significant growth in social media usage indicates not only the increasing importance of social media in the daily lives of Kenyans, but also the increasing prominence of digital platforms in general. When coupled with the fact that 99.7% of internet users (aged between 16 and 64) own a smartphone, and a similar 99.7% of internet users engaged with a social media platform within the preceding month (DataReportal Kenya, 2022), this demonstrates the growth and influence of digital platforms across all demographics in Kenya.

Social media in the public sphere

Over the years, digital platforms, and social media in particular, have become the online equivalent of the public sphere, hosting the political discourse of the day across various platforms.

Today, people are faced with social media at their disposal where, by virtue of the nature of social media and being one or two steps removed from the reader, people are able to say things that they would not ordinarily say in person while discussing politics. This offers a glimpse into understanding how politics and social media inter-relate in the public sphere. A substantial majority of social media users feel that people on social media act in ways that

are at odds with their typical in person demeanour (Pew, 2016). It is, therefore, a place where people go beyond the boundaries of face-to-face discourse, and sometimes beyond the scope of decency, to speak their minds about political issues and the world around them. Social media provides a platform in which they can be bolder than they would ordinarily be, more sincere, or even more provocative. In many cases, people also choose to engage anonymously in this way.

Social media has, therefore, successfully provided a proverbial microphone to every user, with its speakers aimed outward towards an ever-attentive audience. In a conversation with a friend in a bar or café for instance, there is the reasonable expectation that the conversation is private and that, when you part ways, the conversation ends there, only subject to revival by the two participants. Not so with social media. The electorate have also embraced the opportunity the proverbial microphone provides and are now confronted with the golden but loaded options to either whisper into it, shout through it, or turn it off entirely. As a result, our politics is now revolutionised through enhanced communication in which candidates and voters have a choice of online platforms for productive dialogue. With social media, there is essentially no barrier to entry for participation, and the conversation can continue and thrive long after the votes have been cast and the ballots tallied. This union between social media and politics has also proven that it can be divisive and polarising if not carefully moderated.

The public sphere, therefore, is generally conceived as a 'space' characterised by communication about public matters, such as that found in journalism, opinion and argumentation, in face-to-face communication as well as in mediated communication (Rasmussen, 2014). An authoritative discussion on the subject (Habermas, 1996) similarly sees the public sphere as a 'communication structure that refers neither to the function nor to the contents of everyday communication but to the social space generated in communicative action'. Social media, therefore, occupies a fundamental space: it is the modern-day public sphere, moderating much of our communication, particularly that which is political in nature.

Social media and the political process

Social media and smart phones make natural bedfellows. Emerging economies have seen an explosion of mobile ownership in a manner never seen before (Kevin, 2022). By 2019, it was estimated that half of the world's population was online; technology thus played an important role in getting people more involved in democracy and politics. The use of social media has profoundly impacted every sphere of our lives, with its rapid uptake and widespread usage. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have changed the way media is produced, distributed and consumed. Politicians and voters take advantage of the inherent power and interactive capability that these platforms offer to communicate and reach each other in ways that were not previously possible. Zhuravskaya et al. (2020) note that social media routinely involves elements of both vertical and horizontal communication. In horizontal communication, voters communicate with each other while in vertical communication information comes from a common source with limited interaction. Pande (2011) goes further to state that social media expands the information range available to voters in emerging democracies, where information constraints can sometimes limit citizens' ability to participate in governance processes.

Today, citizen agency and collective action are digitally organised, for both online and offline purposes. Social media is, to some extent, tied to trends, activities and discussions that initially take place in an offline context. These occur offline, or in 'real life', in the first instance, after which the discourse finds its way online, where it is amplified and, in many cases, takes on a different dimension or a life if its own. Thus, offline events and discourse often drive online discourse, much more so than the converse. In turn, however, social media is likely to affect both online and subsequent offline policy and political discourse, especially given its growing prominence as a source of news.

The use of social media has become part and parcel of every political process, from mobilisation and political campaigns to voting and relaying of results. Social media platforms have become the new town halls, neighbourhood bars or cafes where people gather to discuss matters of public interest, including politics. This may have been further exacerbated

by the Covid-19 pandemic, when physical interactions were no longer possible and engagements were forced to move into online spaces.

Through social media, individuals can be mobilised or can mobilise themselves for collective action. Social media serves as a very powerful and persuasive digital communication platform. Social media can influence and change opinions when it comes to political views because of the abundance of ideas, thoughts and opinions circulating through it. This arrangement fits well within the political landscape because politicians' enhanced profiles and digital presence are key elements in building their online influence. According to Pew Research Center, one of the best recorded influences of social media on elections was in the early 2000s when Barack Obama harnessed the power of social media in his first presidential campaign. He rallied a majority of voters and won the 2008 election (Pew, 2008). Records show that around 74% of internet users sought election news online during Obama's first campaign, representing 55% of the entire adult population at the time.

Differing social media incentives

The Digital 2022 Global Overview Report revealed that of 4.62 billion internet users globally, a significant proportion – 53.1% to be exact – used the internet to keep up to date with news and events. At the same time, 35.1% of internet users reported using social media for the same purpose, to read news stories. A further 24.5% of internet users indicated that they used social media to share and discuss opinions with others.

This data provides a useful insight into the segment of the population who are using the internet and particularly social media for the purpose of engaging in the policy discourse, potentially with a view to informing political or electoral choices. Admittedly, there is a segment of social media users who are not of voting age and may therefore have slightly different incentives. It is possible to identify and isolate this demographic for purposes of analysis. According to the Digital 2022 Global Overview Report, 13.1% of social media users are in the 13-19-year-old demographic, meaning that the majority of social media users are of voting age. Although many of the 13-19-year-old demographic are below 18 years old, and therefore ineligible to vote in many jurisdictions, they cannot be ignored, given the youth

bulge phenomenon, and the fact that they are future potential voters, many of whom will become eligible to vote in less than one electoral cycle. The politician with a long-term perspective, therefore, would be wise to engage this demographic in their comfort zone, on social media.

The primary incentive of the electorate in this case is to use social media to participate in the policy discourse. In many cases prior to the advent of social media, there were only limited opportunities to engage, most of which were either time-consuming or unappealing to some. As a result, social media appears to have made politicians more accessible, provided an increasing number of people the opportunity to participate at a time and place of their choosing and in a manner that is convenient to most.

The incentives of the politician are slightly more complex. In an ideal world, the politician would relish the opportunity social media provides to be engaged with the public online: to be able to gauge public sentiment on important issues and to communicate and respond to constituents easily and at little or no cost. That being said, *real politik* also dictates that politicians will be wary of reputational harm that may arise from publication of their failings or misdeeds, and the ever-present realities of re-election bids. Thus, the incentives of the politician are a mixed bag: wanting to be seen to be accessible to the electorate, without compromising their position or chances of re-election.

The situation in Kenya

Digital spaces, by their very nature, are fraught with opportunities as well as risks. In a digital age, societies across the globe are increasingly consumed by the digital space, making use of it for personal, professional and entertainment purposes. It is nearly impossible to imagine a modern existence without access to the digital space for one reason or another. The situation is no different in politics.

In Kenya, and indeed much of the African continent, political discourse has historically been a largely one-sided affair, characterised by political rallies in which politicians speak from a dais to an attentive electorate. The agenda or subject matter of these rallies is almost always prescribed by the political elite themselves, based on political priorities of the day. In the

African context where political elites can often be demi-gods, the rise of digital platforms has the potential to change this narrative and usher in an environment where political discourse becomes a two-way discussion, presenting opportunities for politicians and the electorate to engage on pertinent societal and political priorities.

Mobile phone penetration and social media usage are on the rise across the African continent. In East Africa, 62% of the population have a mobile connection (DataReportal Kenya, 2022). With regard to social media usage, there are 11 million social media users in Kenya, registering an annual increase of 2.2 million users from the previous year. In total, 20.2% of the population are social media users (DataReportal Kenya, 2022). In theory, this presents numerous opportunities for more vibrant political debate and, more importantly, to set the stage for a more people-centred and needs-driven public policy agenda.

At the start of 2022, 29% of Kenyans lived in urban areas while 71% lived in rural areas (DataReportal Kenya, 2022). Thus, the vast majority of the Kenyan populace can be found in rural areas. Despite widespread mobile phone and internet coverage and usage, not all rural areas are covered my mobile service providers. This means that only a portion of rural dwellers enjoy internet access.

Although social media has been influential in providing opportunities for political discourse and news reporting, the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation presents a monumental challenge. In Kenya, 82% of survey respondents in a recent survey said they used social media as a source of news (Statista, 2022). The same survey found that large portions of social media users globally admit that they do not trust social platforms as a source of news, yet they continue to access these networks on a daily basis.

Research by the Reuters Institute has revealed that 75% of respondents found it difficult to differentiate between fake and real news on the internet (Newman, 2021). This is a conundrum given the appetite for news and politics sourced from social media, despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of people struggle to discern what is fake and what is real. Indeed, this is one of the goals of misinformation and disinformation campaigns: to poison

the information environment such that no one knows what is true or false and to obliterate critical thinking.

How is fake news defined? There are numerous definitions of fake news, misinformation and disinformation. One useful definition of 'fake news' is 'purposefully crafted, sensational, emotionally charged, misleading or totally fabricated information that mimics the form of mainstream news' (Zimdars and McLeod, 2020). Another definition (Northeastern University, 2023) goes further to break down this term by looking at three varieties of 'fake news'. The first two are fairly common, while the third is less common yet equally important:

1. **Disinformation** – Content that is intentionally false and designed to cause harm. It is motivated by three distinct factors: to make money; to have political influence, either foreign or domestic; or to cause trouble for the sake of it.
2. **Misinformation** – False content, but the person sharing does not realise that it is false or misleading.
3. **Malinformation** – Genuine information that is shared out of context with an intent to cause harm.

The main difference, therefore, between disinformation and misinformation is the element of intent.

Needless to say, this can prove disastrous for democratic processes, as has been proven in numerous elections around the world. A 2018 report by Portland Africa revealed that in 10 elections across the African continent between 2017 and 2018, bots were increasingly prevalent in attempting to sway public opinion and fuel negative sentiment. In Kenya, the Portland survey also found that two thirds of Kenyans (67%) preferred to read comprehensive and detailed information over concise and summarised information; and 78% preferred factual and accurate information over opinion-based news.

As a result of the overwhelming trust Kenyans have in social media as a news source, even mainstream media outlets have, on occasion, been known to curate 'breaking news' from social media, sometimes with regrettable results. It becomes relatively easy to get caught out

by information that is intended to mislead or deceive. Indeed, mainstream media have a duty to report objectively, factually and responsibly in an effort to counter misinformation and fake news.

Most favoured social media platforms

Most politicians in Kenya seem to favour the use of Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. There is some evidence of an increasing penchant for Instagram. Of these, Facebook and Twitter seem to be the most favoured platforms by the political class for engagement and sharing of activities and accomplishments. It is instructive to note that each of these platforms is used differently: a uniform approach across platforms would not be effective given the nuanced operations of each platform.

WhatsApp is the most widely used digital platform, with 93.5% of internet users using the platform each month (DataReportal Kenya, 2022). As it is a widely used communication platform, politicians and their handlers find this platform particularly useful for individual and group messaging, as well as for purposes of mobilisation and organisation of manpower and activities on the ground. Facebook comes second to WhatsApp, with 89.6% of internet users making use of the platform (DataReportal Kenya, 2022). Given the nature of the platform, and the ability to reach wide audiences, this platform is widely used for online engagement as well as highlighting initiatives that a politician is undertaking. Instagram and TikTok trail WhatsApp and Facebook, registering 69.4% and 60.8% usage, respectively (DataReportal Kenya, 2022). Twitter is the least used of the top five digital platforms in Kenya at 60%, though this does not mean it has the least impact. While it tends to be associated with urban elites, the platform plays host to a considerable volume of political discussion and engagement. In many respects, this may be the most prominent platform for political engagement. Given the character limit and the immediacy of a tweet, it is also widely used to relay 'Breaking News' and is equally consulted as a news source for political news and developments.

Whether or not the popularity of Twitter as a preferred online platform will continue remains to be seen.

A resource or a threat?

It is not in doubt that social media provides a plethora of opportunities for robust political and societal debate, despite the attendant risks of misinformation and disinformation. The assumption is that, given the very nature of digital platforms, social media avails a unique opportunity for a two-way exchange of ideas, policies and political ideology between politicians and the electorate. This paper explores whether, in fact, that has been the case in Kenya and the ultimate effect digital platforms have had on relations between politicians and the electorate.

The questions that arise in this context are:

1. With the rise of digital platforms (including social media) and their increasing prominence in politics, to what extent are politicians more/less accessible?
2. If they have become more accessible, is there any evidence to demonstrate that this increased accessibility has had any meaningful impact on policy, legislation, service delivery or accountability? Is there any evidence of impact on policy and/or legislation?
3. What role (if any) has misinformation played in relations between politicians and the electorate?
4. What (if anything) can be done to protect the electorate against the risks of misinformation and disinformation?

This paper critically explores these questions with a view to gaining a greater understanding of the extent to which social media plays an enabling and facilitative role with regard to political discourse and relations between politicians and the electorate. The assumption is that digital platforms facilitate greater access to politicians than in the past. The paper explores whether that is the case in practice and to what effect, if so. Public participation in governance and political processes is a central tenet of the Constitution of Kenya 2010, and forms part of the national values and principles of governance (Art 10). It is conceivable, therefore, that digital platforms could play a role in the realisation of this fundamental constitutional principle.

Methodology

The key resources used in this study were secondary literature reviews and key informant interviews with politicians, governance and public policy experts, political scientists and members of civil society from Kenya and across the African continent. Ten interviews were held. Seven respondents were from Kenya, and gave perspectives on the Kenyan context, while the remaining three gave perspectives from the broader African context.

Key findings

Accessibility of politicians in the digital era

Globally, rapid digitisation is affecting every aspect of our lives from the way we work, do business and interact to the nature of our political discourse. Digital platforms have become the new media of our time. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, are today an integral part of our political discourse and democratic governance. They have, by and large, successfully revolutionised the manner in which politicians and their constituents communicate. Politics has taken on a new dimension in this digital era, with citizen voices and movements radically amplified through these platforms on an unprecedented scale. Politicians are not to be left behind, with their agenda setting and engagement all being communicated and articulated through the same spaces. The digital revolution has necessitated both the globalisation and localisation of ideas, opportunities and trends.

From the perspectives of various respondents interviewed for this paper, it was evident that most politicians in Kenya and beyond have prioritised the issue of social media presence. Most have active accounts on Facebook and Twitter with some also sharing content through Instagram, Tiktok and/or generating posts through WhatsApp groups. These media have become avenues through which politicians communicate their programmes, activities, events and projects to the electorate and, in some cases, get real time feedback. Others use them to showcase milestones achieved, broadcast their speeches and for articulation of topical issues affecting constituents or the nation at large.

With the proliferation of mobile phones, for instance, across the African continent, digital platforms are now in the hands of a significant and still growing number of people. With little more than the click of a button, a message is instantaneously broadcast to a wide audience. Digital platforms have managed to level the playing field and ordinary citizens are now in control of simple means through which they can reach their leaders to voice their concerns. Politicians are also beneficiaries of these technological advances: they are presented with a much more inexpensive medium for keeping up to date with what is happening in their areas of jurisdiction, as well as being able to communicate to their constituents. However, one respondent pointedly noted that in as much as it offers the potential for two-way communication, politicians still use it more as a means to *push* their agenda rather than to *pull* views and feedback from the electorate.

Box 1: Push vs Pull

Politicians are known to use social media to *push* their messaging, policies, ideological leaning and activities. It is not uncommon to come across images of development projects or public meetings and political rallies on their social media accounts. These are used to demonstrate to the electorate that the politician is busy working for their best interest and, in some cases, highlights exactly what the politician is doing to that end. Despite the fact that social media, by design, is well suited to an exchange of ideas between users, politicians still seem stuck in the old way of doing things, as is suggested in the much-acclaimed title of the book 'Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics' (Nyabola, 2018). Even in a digital age where politicians have moved some of their engagement online, they are yet to fully embrace the functionality and benefits of social media, and continue to use it in an 'analogue' manner, as a one-way platform to simply push their message.

There is, however, less evidence of politicians using social media as a means to *pull* feedback, ideas or priorities from their constituents or the electorate at large. This is unfortunate as social media provide an extremely cost-effective, useful and efficient way of collating views and feedback from the electorate. Even where the electorate provide feedback on posts from a politician, these are rarely responded to or taken up. As the primary beneficiaries and indeed employers of politicians, this contemptuous disregard of input from the public may actually serve to diminish the standing of a politician in the eyes of the public. Feedback and input from the general public can greatly enrich policy making and legislation. Furthermore, in some jurisdictions, such as Kenya, social media can be an enabler, in that public participation in the policy-making and legislative process is a constitutional requirement.

The question of bridging proximity, therefore, is not in doubt and most politicians are under immense pressure to ensure that they are present, available and reachable via social media so that the electorate feels they are able to engage with them at any time. One survey respondent also noted that it was important for a politician to maintain a social media

presence so as to prevent others from setting up accounts in their name, whether merely as a parody, or with benevolent or malicious intent.

> *'It is very difficult to come across a politician who is not in social media today.'*
> *– Survey respondent*

It is not uncommon to find politicians using varied methodologies to grow their online popularity. Some use drama and theatrics in order to remain relevant in the news cycle and in the minds of the Kenyan electorate as much as possible.

The question of whether such interaction accords meaningful engagement is inconclusive since most of these accounts are run by social media teams or managers employed by the politician. Another important consideration is the claim by some respondents that young politicians are more likely to operate their accounts personally while their older counterparts are more likely to deploy the services of media teams or managers to conduct their online engagements on their behalf. The electorate, however, may not be alive to this reality unless they are well informed. They, therefore, still believe that social media provides a direct interface with their elected leaders. The feedback politicians receive through their accounts can be overwhelming and it would be impossible for them to respond to each individual engagement. Hence the need for a team or social media manager, at the very least.

Social media, despite its improved access, may not be the most ideal platform to interact with politicians if one expects real time feedback or results. This is because, for the most part, questions and queries go unanswered, except for a few. One respondent suspected that those who did get responses might be loyalists or familiar to the politician.

Improved digital presence and its role in our polity

Keen observers of emerging political trends in Kenya are, however, divided on the real impact of online interaction between politicians and the electorate, in terms of influence, accountability and its contribution to legislation and policy formulation. The majority of

respondents agreed that it has resulted in a positive contribution in policy and legislation. They cited examples in which laws had been amended, set aside and/or debated afresh following public outcry or pressure channelled through digital platforms. Some politicians have been known to use their social media to share budget engagements and documentation, Bills in the legislature to solicit public opinion, updates on projects status and information on disbursements of various local funds, such as bursaries. These types of engagement are a rich resource that the electorate can use to track the performance of elected leaders.

Some respondents took a contrary view, and viewed social media engagements as little more than hot air, a mere public relations exercise that ought to be taken with a pinch of salt. The latter group asserted that politicians seek to take advantage of the optics that come with digital media to generate content just to appear to be hard at work.

> *'A lot of it is PR exercise like launching mbao (wooden) bridges, to street lights or other laughable things.' – Survey Respondent*

Despite the 'silicon savannah' moniker with a rapidly growing digital community and space, there was general consensus among respondents that the value of physical engagement still reigned supreme in Kenya. Respondents affirmed that digital interactions could never replace the one-on-one engagements that politicians have with the electorate through barazas (informal meetings), rallies and constituency visits. It is likely there are cultural undertones at play here, given that Kenyan and African cultures tend to place a premium on social and human interaction. Physical presence is still cherished and, in the Kenyan or African political arena, those subscribing to this way of thinking felt that it may only be possible to use digital platforms to complement physical engagement rather than as a substitute for it.

A further critical consideration is that of the constitutional requirement for public participation in all governance issues, including the enactment of legislation. The Constitution of Kenya states:

> '*The national values and principles of governance in this Article bind all State organs, State officers, public officers and all persons whenever any of them –*
>
> *a) Applies or interprets this Constitution*
>
> *b) Enacts, applies, or interprets any law; or*

c) Makes or implements public policy decisions.' (Art 10 Constitution of Kenya, 2010)

Digital platforms offer an important medium through which politicians can engage the electorate (and vice versa) on key policy or legislative matters for the purpose of satisfying this constitutional principle. Once again, this is likely to only be a complementary mechanism as, if challenged in court, it would be unlikely that the court would find that a digital engagement in and of itself was an adequate public participation mechanism given the significant number of Kenyans still without access to the internet and digital platforms. As access and uptake increase, however, there will need to be judicial interpretation of this matter to determine the extent to which digital platforms can adequately enable the public to participate in governance and development.

Misinformation and disinformation

The Digital Economy Report 2021 (UNCTAD, 2021) acknowledges the complexities involved in governing data and data flows across borders in ways that can provide sustainable development benefits. In a post-truth era, the greatest threat that comes with the use of digital platforms and sources is the rise of misinformation and disinformation.

Misinformation in digital platforms manifest in a variety of ways. Authors of misinformation often craft content to play to pre-existing prejudices about political leaders, parties, organisations and the mainstream media. Sometimes it may simply be the sharing of outright fabrications; in other cases, before fact-checking can be carried out, the damage is already done. Cases may contain elements of truth to make them seem credible to target audiences but, on closer examination, they are found to be false or inaccurate. In other instances, damaging information or content is shared knowingly in order to tarnish the standing or reputation of a politician, or for the purpose of creating a particular narrative that offers political capital to one group against another.

Social media content moderation

Digital platforms, by their very nature, often churn out content without moderation by editorial or institutional gatekeepers, as would be the case with traditional media such as television and radio. Digital 'warriors' of the day, therefore, operate within a fluid

environment of limited rules and are easily able to share suspect or malicious content, which is immediately consumed by a large audience.

Social media content moderation has proven to be a challenge for most social media platforms. The reasons for this range from the sheer volume of content that requires moderation to the number of languages used on platforms. In Kenya alone, over 65 distinct languages are spoken – meaning that significant resources would be required to provide moderation in all those languages. Beyond the challenge of moderation, lies the more fundamental question of the extent to which social media platforms are *willing* to take responsibility for the fora they have created, and offer moderation to ensure that these fora are used responsibly and are not abused.

Large platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, for example, make most of their profits from advertising and adopt a business model centred on drawing in users. Therefore, they cannot afford to lose engagement on their sites. At the same time, they are under public and political pressure to stop disinformation and address harmful content that may appear on their sites. Smaller platforms that cater to specific interests do not have the same problem and would be more inclined to simply adhere to the doctrine of free speech. A recent study finds that a social media firm's content moderation strategy is influenced mostly by its revenue model (Yildrim et al, 2022).

The challenge that faces social media platforms is about striking a balance between acting as the custodians of the Internet and, at the same time, maintaining their position as a bastion of self-expression and user-generated content. Facebook, on its part, has committed to allocating 5% of its revenue, $3.7 billion, to content moderation (Yildrim et al, 2022). This amount is greater than Twitter's entire annual revenue. Neither consumers nor regulators, however, seem to be satisfied with these efforts. It would appear, therefore, that the primary consideration driving the content moderation debate for social media companies is financial – the bottom line. In some cases the bottom line may rely on advertising: either pushing engagement to advertisers or a subscription fee that individual consumers are required to pay. That being said, there is a significant difference between the two revenue models. Advertising models rely on delivering maximum engagement to advertisers, while

subscription models rely on revenue generated and the ability to attract paying customers. Therefore, social media platforms that rely on advertising revenue are more likely to conduct content moderation with lax community standards in order to retain the maximum number of consumers and engagement. In comparison, platforms that rely on subscription revenue are less likely to conduct content moderation in the interest of upholding free speech for their customers.

Most content moderation is conducted by way of technology, at least in the first instance. Yet another factor to consider is the quality of the content moderation technology. A self-interested social media platform is unlikely to benefit from technological improvements in this area. Indeed, a platform that relies on advertising revenue may not necessarily benefit from better technology as a result of the fact that less accurate technology creates a more porous environment, therefore attracting increased engagement. Content moderation on online platforms, therefore, is not only an outcome of the technological capabilities but, rather, one driven by their economic incentives (Yildrim et al, 2022).

Guarding the electorate from varieties of fake news

Fake news and, in particular, misinformation and disinformation have become some of the greatest threats associated with the use of digital media. The unpredictability with regard to what comes next from digital spaces makes it a potentially volatile medium. This presents a challenge to all in society, from the high and the mighty to the ordinary citizen.

> *'An illustration: when the former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta had to deactivate his Twitter account after incessant negative attacks and insults from the citizenry and hacking of his account.' – Survey respondent*

Politicians and other public figures are often on the receiving end when it comes to the issue of pseudo and parody accounts created to impersonate them and sometimes to communicate misleading or erroneous information. Due to sometimes outrageous content, such accounts can become more popular than politicians' actual accounts – attracting a huge following of people who believe them to be genuine accounts run by or on behalf of the politician.

The volatility that comes with politics therefore makes social media a key battlefield as politicians explore and hope to exploit any available opportunity to influence the masses. This creates a fertile breeding ground for fake news that is intended to disparage opponents and proffer an advantage to the competitors. Research by the Reuters Institute revealed that 75% of respondents found it difficult to differentiate between fake and real news (Newman, 2021). With the reality of a significant proportion of Kenyan news and politics sourced from social media and the fact that 'bad news travels fast', misinformation and disinformation have an inherently greater capacity to go viral than other sources of information, making it even more difficult to control.

To address various forms of fake news and guard the public from consuming erroneous or malicious content, significant responsibility must be placed on the owners of these platforms. Efforts and guidelines to streamline content must be steered from within and on a global scale. The pervasive nature of these platforms and the fact that they are not confined by physical or conventional space makes it even more difficult to oversee their activities. The challenge is only exacerbated by the fact that there is no global consensus on the issue.

A further complication is that the social media platforms are in competition for numbers and metrics. Thus, from a financial perspective, they do not have much incentive to address this problem because their business model is driven by traffic and metrics. This presents a conundrum in attempting to address the problem of fake news or misinformation; unless regulators and governments work in tandem to reign them in, the companies themselves are only likely to take remedial measures for fear of losing trust in the marketplace, metrics and subsequently revenue.

Efforts to protect the citizens from the vagaries of misinformation and disinformation must therefore be carefully crafted to balance all these competing interests. In an environment that is fast-moving and with only minimal regulation, innovation will be required to moderate hateful and divisive content. In the Kenyan context, this is often spewed in vernacular, making it difficult for international social media companies to moderate this content. Some respondents were of the view that the administrators and moderators of these digital media

must collaborate and work with national regulatory institutions and entities, such as the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) and the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC), in order for Kenya to address the misuse and abuse that occurs on such platforms. With the reality that misinformation and fake news are more prevalent during electoral cycles, it is critical that vigilance during these periods is enhanced. Digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have successfully been used by political operatives to share propaganda and incite people across the globe. Unless remedial measures are put in place to curb such behaviour, we have already seen the capacity social media has to cause discord and upheavals and, in extreme cases, ignite unrest and violence. The aftermath of the 6 January 2020 US election is a case in point.

Facebook, on their part, has deployed systems to identify and disable ones account if it is deemed to be sharing content that does not meet the threshold of what is permissible on their platform. Twitter, too, have successfully de-platformed users on several occasions, including the much publicised deactivation of the former US President Trump's account when it was found to be in breach of their guidelines. There is much public debate about the propriety of de-platforming individuals, especially regarding politicians and their political views. While this issue has far from been resolved, it is clear that there are many who feel that, despite one holding views that may be unconscionable, the principle of freedom of speech must apply to all.

Taken a step further, one survey respondent questioned whether privately owned social media provide the correct or appropriate forum for public policy debate and/or discourse on public policy issues. From his perspective, these platforms were neither created nor designed to host or resolve political or public policy issues. The 'social' in social media implies an informal space for human social interaction, rather than a forum for discussion of public policy issues. As such, it would be foolhardy to debate such complex issues on these media, or to expect solutions to emanate from them. Where, then, in a digital age should public policy issues be debated?

The same respondent makes the argument that Kenya has come to be known as the Silicon Savannah and there is, thus, no shortage of expertise to develop purpose-built platforms for

use within the region and continent for public policy discourse. Rather than for Kenya and Africa to wilfully provide their data to private and for-profit Western companies, he proposed that Kenya could lead the way in creating platforms for public policy engagement as well as other areas of national and regional development purposes: to attract the best African minds, scholars, public policy experts and government officials. This might be done in collaboration with regional bodies such as the African union, for example.

In this regard, there may be lessons to learn from China and their 'WeChat' platform. WeChat is an all-encompassing platform that combines, among other things, social media, instant messaging and payment facilities. Users are able to access all these common functionalities, as well as make payments and book everything including rides, flights and hotels. Critically, WeChat has an in-built functionality that enables the addition of 'mini-programs' or additional apps for a specific purpose. A similar platform on the African continent, therefore, would be able to accommodate an app dedicated to public policy, for example. While there are lessons to learn from the likes of WeChat, it is not without controversy: the platform is very strictly monitored by Chinese authorities and politically sensitive topics are routinely censored. These types of restriction may not be entirely compatible with fundamental rights and freedoms that are characteristically associated with a democratic society, but the point is that it may be possible to conceive and develop a platform along these lines that is more compatible with the desires and aspirations of the African continent. Without a doubt, within the Silicon Savannah, the requisite expertise exists to conceptualise and deliver such innovation. Platforms such as Mpesa are proof positive of that fact.

Finally, the role of civic education cannot be understated in mitigating the threat posed by fake news, which thrives in environments with high levels of ignorance. Ignorance feeds into the misinformation and disinformation loop and perpetuates it further. When the electorate are well informed, they are able to sieve through the content they receive and separate what is factual and what is suspect. Educating the electorate in a simplified way and in a language they understand best will go a long way towards addressing problems associated with misinformation and fake news. A well informed electorate will also be able to understand their duties and responsibilities and, in turn, improve and safeguard their online engagement in political discourse.

Recommendations

As a result of the findings of this study, the following recommendations may be considered:

For governments/regulatory authorities

1. There is a need for governments to work together with the big tech companies such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp on a regulatory framework that can help deal with the volume of fake news that is prevalent on their platforms.
2. Governments and regulatory authorities should explore enforcement of cybercrime regulations and create a stringent environment that punishes inciters and peddlers of fake news online at national level.

For tech companies/social media companies

1. The big tech companies must appreciate the global and multilingual space and context of their users and explore ways to have arrangements that make it possible for moderation of content shared in local languages, which are preferred for incitement and spreading hateful content.
2. Civic education: social media users also have a responsibility to use available tools to fact check and verify information sources before sharing. This is a form of civic responsibility which may require awareness creation to achieve.

For politicians

1. Politicians need to be more mindful of the opportunities that digital platforms present and recognise that social media is not merely a forum for them to showcase their work. It is also an online forum for them to receive feedback and engage the electorate, so as to learn first-hand about the challenges they face and, thereby, collaborate on finding solutions to shared challenges.

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