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SOCIAL MEDIA, POLITICAL MOBILISATION, AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Platform Affordances, Civic Engagement, and Disinformation Dynamics in Nigeria, Senegal, and Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Background: Social media platforms have transformed the landscape of political communication, civic engagement, and democratic mobilisation in Sub-Saharan Africa. The rapid expansion of mobile internet access and smartphone adoption has made platforms including Twitter/X, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok central infrastructure for political campaigns, citizen journalism, protest coordination, and electoral monitoring. Simultaneously, these platforms have become vectors for disinformation, hate speech, and coordinated manipulation that threaten democratic processes and public discourse quality.

Aim: This study examined how social media platform affordances shape political mobilisation and democratic participation in Nigeria, Senegal, and Zimbabwe, with particular attention to the dynamics of civic engagement, electoral discourse, and disinformation during recent election cycles.

Methodology: A mixed-methods research design combined digital trace data analysis of Twitter/X and Facebook content during the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections, the 2024 Senegalese presidential elections, and the 2023 Zimbabwean general elections, with qualitative interviews from 48 political communication practitioners, civil society activists, and journalists across the three countries. Content analysis examined 124,000 social media posts. Thematic analysis examined practitioner perspectives.

Findings: Social media platforms significantly enabled civic engagement and protest coordination in all three contexts, with WhatsApp emerging as the most consequential mobilisation infrastructure due to its end-to-end encryption and group broadcast capabilities. Disinformation flows were substantial during all three elections, with Nigerian and Zimbabwean electoral processes experiencing the most intensive coordinated inauthentic behaviour. Senegal's pre-election social media environment showed higher civic information sharing and lower disinformation prevalence relative to the other two cases.

Contributions: The study contributes to political communication, digital democracy, and media studies literature by providing comparative empirical evidence of social media's dual democratic roles — enabling mobilisation while enabling manipulation — across three distinct African electoral contexts.

Keywords: *Social media, Political mobilisation, Democratic participation, Disinformation, Electoral communication, Sub-Saharan Africa.*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The relationship between social media and democratic politics in Africa has become one of the most contested empirical and normative questions in contemporary political communication research. Optimistic accounts emphasise the democratising potential of social media platforms, which have enabled citizens excluded from mainstream media to produce and distribute political content, coordinate collective action, monitor elections, and hold governments accountable across the continent (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022). Sceptical accounts point to the same platforms' roles as vectors of disinformation, instruments of authoritarian surveillance, and amplifiers of ethnic and political polarisation that undermine the deliberative foundations of democratic politics (Cheeseman et al., 2023).

Nigeria, Senegal, and Zimbabwe provide a strategically varied comparative context for examining these dynamics. Nigeria is Africa's most populous democracy, with a highly active social media landscape in which the 2020 EndSARS protests demonstrated the mobilising power of Twitter and Instagram, and the 2023 presidential elections generated extensive social media disinformation campaigns documented by fact-checking organisations. Senegal's 2024 elections occurred in a context of significant political instability and social media shutdowns ordered by the Faye administration, generating important evidence about state responses to digital mobilisation. Zimbabwe's hybrid regime presents a case in which social media mobilisation occurs under systematic government surveillance and strategic disinformation production by state-aligned actors (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2022).

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Platform Affordances and Political Communication

The concept of platform affordances — the relational properties of digital platforms that enable or constrain particular types of social action — provides the primary theoretical lens for this study. Bucher and Helmond's (2018) framework of platform affordances, applied to political communication by Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2022), distinguishes between visibility affordances (the capacity to amplify political messages), persistence affordances (the capacity to archive and recirculate content), editability affordances (the capacity to modify content after publication), and association affordances (the capacity to link political actors and citizens). Each platform exhibits a distinct affordance profile that shapes its political communication dynamics.

Disinformation and Democratic Integrity

Disinformation theory distinguishes between misinformation (false information shared without intent to deceive), disinformation (false information shared with intent to deceive), and malinformation (true information shared with intent to harm). Cheeseman et al. (2023) extend this typology to African electoral contexts, identifying electoral disinformation — false information specifically designed to suppress voter turnout, manipulate candidate perceptions, or delegitimise electoral institutions — as a distinct and particularly democratically damaging category requiring dedicated analytical attention.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Digital trace data were collected from Twitter/X and Facebook using the Academic Research API and CrowdTangle respectively, capturing 124,000 posts from the 30-day pre-election periods of the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections, 2024 Senegalese presidential elections, and 2023 Zimbabwean general elections. Content analysis classified posts by type (civic information, political advocacy, electoral monitoring, disinformation, hate speech, entertainment) using a codebook validated across two independent coders (Cohen's kappa = 0.81). Coordinated inauthentic behaviour was detected using network clustering analysis following the methodology of Nkonde et al. (2023). Qualitative interviews were conducted with 48 practitioners (16 per country) examining social media use in political communication, fact-checking operations, and civil society digital advocacy.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

WhatsApp as the Central Mobilisation Infrastructure

While Twitter/X and Facebook provided the most publicly visible social media political communication across all three elections, interview data consistently identify WhatsApp as the most consequential mobilisation infrastructure due to its end-to-end encryption, group broadcast functionality, and near-universal adoption among politically active citizens. Nigerian civil society organisations coordinating electoral monitoring for the 2023 elections used WhatsApp groups to coordinate observer networks across 36 states in real time. Senegalese opposition supporters used WhatsApp broadcast lists to distribute legal guidance for protest participants during the 2024 pre-election unrest. Zimbabwean opposition supporters used WhatsApp for campaign coordination that would have been too risky on monitored public platforms. This finding extends Mutsvairo and Ragnedda's (2022) analysis of private messaging infrastructure as a parallel democratic public sphere operating below surveillance thresholds.

Disinformation Dynamics Across Contexts

Content analysis reveals substantial disinformation flows during all three elections, with significant cross-country variation. Nigeria's electoral disinformation environment was characterised by coordinated networks of fake accounts generating false voter registration information and fabricated election results from unofficial counting centres, with network clustering analysis identifying 14 distinct coordinated inauthentic behaviour clusters active during the election period. Zimbabwe's disinformation environment was distinguished by its state-aligned character, with content analysis identifying government-affiliated organisations as the predominant source of electoral disinformation targeting opposition parties. Senegal showed lower disinformation prevalence, which practitioners attributed to the dense civil society fact-checking ecosystem developed around previous elections, consistent with the capacity-building model documented by Cheeseman et al. (2023).

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media platforms play dual and contradictory roles in African democratic processes, enabling civic mobilisation and electoral accountability while simultaneously providing infrastructure for disinformation and authoritarian manipulation. WhatsApp's encryption makes it the most resilient mobilisation infrastructure and simultaneously the most difficult disinformation environment to monitor. Platform companies should strengthen their electoral integrity programmes in African markets, investing in local language content moderation and local civil society partnerships. Governments should refrain from social media shutdowns during elections, which suppress legitimate civic communication alongside disinformation. Civil society fact-checking capacity should be supported through independent funding mechanisms protected from government interference.

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