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## Bridging Digital and Democratic Spaces: Social Media's Role in Building an Inclusive Democracy in Uganda

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### Introduction

How can social media be leveraged to enhance democratic participation and support peaceful electoral outcomes in Uganda? This paper argues that social media transcends its role as a mere communication medium to serve as a vital democratic space, fostering civic engagement, activism, and transparency in a politically restricted environment. At the same time, it highlights the risk of disinformation, polarization, and conflict.

The intersection of technology and democracy represents one of the most consequential dynamics of the 21st century. As digital platforms permeate political landscapes, they simultaneously democratize access to information and challenge the

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integrity of democratic processes.<sup>1</sup> In Uganda, the unique role of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) in redefining political campaigning and civic engagement is evident. These platforms, with their potential to support civic engagement and transparency, have provided tools for a more informed and participatory democratic process. However, they have also become vectors for disinformation and potential conflict, underscoring the balance between technological innovation and democratic governance.

Globally, the transformative impact of communications technology on democracy is well-documented. From the revolutionary role of the printing press in disseminating political ideas during the 18th century to the internet's ability to connect communities worldwide, technology has shaped how citizens interact with political systems. However, the contemporary landscape of digital innovation presents a paradox. Scholars argue that the current revolution in communications technology, driven by algorithms and the so-called "attention economy," has disrupted traditional political norms, shifting the locus of power from public institutions to private corporations that control digital platforms. This shift highlights both the fragility and the potential of democratic systems in emerging democracies like Uganda. The same tools that can erode civic trust are also instrumental in re-engaging citizens and facilitating transparency, presenting an opportunity to reclaim and strengthen democracy.

In Uganda, traditional media faces significant restrictions, creating a vacuum that social platforms have filled as spaces for political discourse, agenda-setting, framing, and activism. Uganda's political environment—marked by a history of authoritarianism and limited press freedoms—has fueled the adoption of social media as an alternative space for civic expression.<sup>2</sup> With approximately 78% of the population comprising youth who are politically active online, social media plays a central role in Uganda's democratic evolution.

The findings suggest that social media has significantly expanded political participation and transparency in Uganda. It has provided a voice to many previously marginalized in political discussions, thereby enhancing democratic participation. However, it has also deepened existing societal divisions and exacerbated challenges to electoral integrity. This paper proposes preserving digital freedoms and their ethical use while taking advantage of opportunities to promote connectivity and peacebuilding.

## Uganda's Political History Through Communication

Uganda's post-independence political history has been marked by alternating periods of authoritarianism and democratic reforms. The country gained independence in 1962, but political instability soon followed, driven by power struggles among political elites. Military coups, such as the 1971 ousting of Milton Obote by Idi Amin, plunged the country into dictatorship and human rights abuses during Amin's rule (1971–1979).<sup>3</sup> The period of civil conflict during Obote's second tenure (1980–1985) was fueled by contested elections, ethnic tensions, and widespread violence.<sup>4</sup> In



1986, Yoweri Museveni seized power, initiating a period of relative stability under the National Resistance Movement (NRM). However, this stability came with limited political pluralism, as Uganda operated under a “no-party democracy” until the 2005 constitutional referendum reinstated political parties. The country’s first multi-party elections in 2006 were seen as a milestone. Still, they were marred by allegations of fraud, voter suppression, and state-sponsored violence, underscoring the fragility of Uganda’s democratic processes.<sup>5</sup>

The 1995 Constitution enshrined freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, laying a foundation for reinstating political pluralism. Yet these freedoms remain precarious due to the autocratic tendencies of the incumbent regime. State actors have increasingly used autocratic lawfare—exploiting legal systems to stifle dissent—alongside censorship and targeted crackdowns on political opposition. For instance, the Public Order Management Act (POMA) has been employed to restrict public gatherings, while opposition figures frequently face arrests under charges of incitement or sedition.<sup>6</sup> Such measures have curtailed civic space and further polarized the political landscape, with election cycles often marked by tension and sporadic violence. These actions underscore the contested nature of Uganda’s democratic space, where communication channels have become battlegrounds for influence and power.

Uganda’s communication landscape has evolved alongside its political trajectory, reflecting shifts in both governance and technology. In the late 20th century, traditional media emerged as a cornerstone of public discourse. Radio became a powerful medium for political mobilization, with local stations hosting *ebimeeza* (public debates).<sup>7</sup> These debates allowed Ugandans to critically engage with political issues, creating a sense of community and accountability. However, their potential to incite dissent led the government to ban *ebimeeza* in 2009. This was compounded by the Uganda Communications Act of 2013, which centralized media regulation, significantly reducing the independence of traditional media outlets. These measures eroded traditional civic platforms, contributing to growing public dissatisfaction and sporadic unrest, particularly during contentious election periods.

While television and print media diversified Uganda’s information ecosystem, their impact was limited by high production costs and literacy barriers. Radio remained dominant, especially in rural areas, until the advent of mobile phones and internet access began reshaping the communication landscape. As of early 2024, Uganda has approximately 13.3 million internet users, representing 27.0% of the total population of 49.25 million. Social media users in Uganda numbered around 2.6 million, equating to 5.3% of the population.<sup>8</sup> The demographic of social media users is skewed younger, with a sizable portion of users between 18 and 34 years old. Uganda’s internet market share is dominated by mobile connections, with 33.34 million active cellular mobile connections, accounting for 67.7% of the population. The five most popular social media platforms in Uganda are X (29.74%), YouTube (26.66%), Pinterest (21.91%), Facebook (11.82%), and WhatsApp (5.3%), highlighting the increasing digital presence of Uganda’s youth.<sup>9</sup>



The advent of social media in the late 2000s introduced new possibilities. Platforms such as Facebook quickly gained popularity, particularly among the youth. During Uganda’s 2016 presidential elections, Facebook became a digital substitute for radio’s ebimeeza. This shift allowed Ugandans to engage in political discourse, exchange ideas, and debate key election issues in a virtual space, circumventing restrictions on traditional media. As Marion Alina observed, Facebook served as a forum for free expression and a platform for amplifying the voices of youth marginalized by state censorship during election cycles.<sup>10</sup>

The 2021 “scientific elections,” held amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrated the centrality of social media to political campaigns. Candidates leveraged platforms like YouTube for live-streamed events, while WhatsApp became a tool for grassroots mobilization. However, the state responded with internet shutdowns and social media blockages, highlighting the vulnerabilities of digital platforms in politically contested environments, raising critical questions about the balance between state control and democratic freedoms.<sup>11</sup>

Elections in Uganda have frequently been marred by violence and polarization, which are deeply intertwined with the manipulation of communication channels. Conflict often originates in the pre-election period, where hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric are propagated, intensifying ethnic and political divisions. During the 2016 elections, reports of hate speech targeting ethnic groups and political opponents surged, with accusations of electoral malpractice dominating public discourse.<sup>12</sup> These narratives incited hostility and undermined trust in the electoral process.

Typically, as election day approaches, tensions escalate due to disinformation and incitement. Digital platforms, while providing spaces for voter mobilization, are weaponized to disseminate false election results and inflammatory content. During the 2021 general elections, for example, fabricated reports about irregularities circulated widely on WhatsApp, fueling localized clashes and further eroding confidence in the electoral system.<sup>13</sup> The ability of such narratives to spark real-world violence underscores the role of communication in escalating electoral conflict.

Electoral violence in Uganda has also been linked to the use of traditional communication methods. The Peace Centre highlights instances where campaign rallies and public announcements were used to incite violence, particularly in areas with historical ethnic and political grievances.<sup>14</sup> This overlap of traditional and digital communication shows the multifaceted role of information in shaping Uganda’s electoral landscape.

## Social Media and the Shaping of Uganda’s Democratic Future

In the 2021 Ugandan general elections, voter turnout stood at 59.3%. The demographic breakdown of voters showed that about 41% were aged between 18 and 30 years, with an equal split between male and female voters.<sup>15</sup> These statistics underscore the





importance of engaging Uganda's diverse electorate, especially the youth, in democratic processes. As Uganda prepares for its 2026 general elections, the pre-election period emerges as a sensitive and volatile time for democracy.

Restrictions on constitutional freedoms, including limitations on assembly, speech, and access to information, pose significant challenges to creating an open, participatory electoral environment. However, the current climate presents a unique opportunity to build electoral integrity and citizen trust in democratic processes. In this context, social media is a powerful tool to counteract these challenges and foster an open, participatory electoral environment.

### **Civic Engagement and Information Dissemination**

Social media has introduced a transformative paradigm in civic participation, blending classical theories of civic engagement with the disruptive potential of digital technologies. It has created decentralized platforms that amplify diverse voices. Unlike traditional media, which often relied on centralized control, social media offers a participatory ecosystem, signaling the growing importance of digital platforms in preserving democratic values.

Where constitutional freedoms of speech, assembly, and expression are often restricted, social media provides a space for political discussions. Zeynep Tufekci argues that these platforms lower barriers to participation, enabling grassroots mobilization even in environments of heightened state surveillance.<sup>16</sup> The accessibility of social media allows for both individual and collective expressions of dissent, transcending geographical and socioeconomic barriers and creating an inclusive public sphere that amplifies the voices of traditionally marginalized people in Uganda's political landscape, such as women, youth, and rural communities.

Social media's ability to shape public narrative lies in its framing and agenda-setting capabilities. For instance, the hashtag #UgandaDecides2021 became a rallying point during Uganda's 2021 elections, leading the discussions around government accountability and human rights.

Similarly, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's theory on mass media's ability to shape discourse is evident in how social media prioritizes issues through collective engagement.<sup>17</sup> Ugandan activists have used platforms like X to draw attention to social problems, such as corruption and electoral irregularities. For example, discussions around the Electoral Commission's management of voter rolls gained prominence not through mainstream media but through persistent online communications amplified by influencers and activists.

### **Digital Activism and Youth Leadership**

Comprising 78% of the population, Uganda's youth have emerged as key players in digital activism. Social media platforms provide a space where young people can engage directly with political leaders. This direct interaction cultivates a sense of agency,



enabling youth to articulate their concerns and demand accountability. The #UGVotes2021 campaign mobilized thousands of young voters to participate in the electoral process, using memes and videos to simplify complex political issues. Youth involvement in digital activism also reflects broader global trends in political participation.<sup>18</sup> Social media empowers younger generations to engage with politics on their terms, using digital tools to amplify their voices.

Paulo Gerbaudo's "soft leadership" and "emotional choreography" provide a framework for understanding how social media facilitates digital activism in Uganda. Leaders of online movements often adopt a decentralized approach, staging platforms where collective emotions are mobilized toward common goals, blending satire, anger, and hope to galvanize public action.<sup>19</sup>

The emotional choreography of social media campaigns allows movements to sustain momentum despite physical restrictions. Appealing to collective anger against corruption or empathy for victims of political violence, these campaigns tap into shared experiences, creating a sense of unity among diverse participants, for example, #stoppolicebrutalityinuganda and #UgandalsBleeding on X. This emotional connection supports resilience, enabling movements to navigate Uganda's restrictive politics. Gerbaudo's arguments demonstrate that the success of digital activism in Uganda hinges on technological access and the strategic use of personal narratives to sustain engagement.

Moreover, platforms like WhatsApp have been instrumental in coordinating localized activism. Community groups use these networks to share resources, plan events, and disseminate updates. This ability to organize without hierarchical structures aligns with the "connective action" logic.<sup>20</sup> This decentralization is significant during elections when disinformation campaigns often proliferate. Users verify information through peer networks, facilitating a culture of digital literacy and critical thinking. In 2021, citizen-led initiatives used platforms to fact-check claims by political candidates, ensuring that voters were informed.<sup>21</sup> This decentralized participation empowers citizens to take collective action, ensuring that civic engagement is not confined to urban elites but extends to rural and marginalized communities.

Agora Discourse, a digital initiative by the Uganda-based Agora Center for Research, exemplifies the decentralized soft power approach described earlier. Utilizing platforms such as X, TikTok, and YouTube, Agora hosts virtual spaces that facilitate dialogues on political issues, corruption, and social justice.<sup>22</sup> These digital gatherings attract live audiences of up to 1,000 individuals, with recorded sessions reaching as many as 50,000 viewers. Agora disrupts conventional digital tool usage, ensuring public discourse amidst tightening government restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly, and association. Agora's campaigns, such as #UgandaParliamentExhibition and various social justice campaigns, have successfully raised public consciousness and demanded accountability from political figures.<sup>23</sup>



## Challenges in the Digital Ecosystem

### Disinformation

Who is responsible for the generation of disinformation? In *Lie Machines*, Philip Howard defines disinformation as a deliberate, coordinated strategy designed to mislead, manipulate, and erode public trust.<sup>24</sup> These strategies leverage human actors, algorithms, and bots to amplify divisive narratives, often for political gain. In Uganda, where communication has historically been controlled to sustain political dominance, disinformation has emerged as a potent weapon. During the 2021 general elections, fabricated videos discrediting candidates circulated widely, alleging them to be foreign operatives. Simultaneously, doctored polling data eroded public confidence in the electoral process, creating confusion and apathy among voters.<sup>25</sup>

William Benoit's "Functional Theory of Political Discourse" helps contextualize this phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> The theory posits that campaign communication is structured around acclaiming achievements, attacking opponents, and defending positions. In Uganda's pre-election context, disinformation often targets the second and third functions. Leading up to elections, opposition figures are attacked with narratives questioning their credibility, while state actors defend their actions with disinformation to mask instances of voter suppression or irregularities. This dual application of disinformation amplifies polarization, making it harder for voters to evaluate their choices critically.

Kristine Höglund's framework on election-related conflict highlights the role communication plays in exacerbating tensions.<sup>27</sup> For instance, in Uganda's 2021 general elections, false claims about manipulated voter rolls in specific districts, such as Wakiso and Mukono—both political strongholds of the opposition—circulated widely on social media platforms. These claims, though unverified, heightened suspicions of electoral malpractice among opposition supporters. Höglund posits that such unchecked disinformation undermines trust in the electoral process, creating fertile ground for unrest. In this case, the claims fueled public outrage, leading to clashes between opposition supporters and security forces in areas perceived as epicenters of vote rigging. This example illustrates how disinformation directly feeds into local grievances, escalating political tensions into physical conflict.

The phenomenon of disinformation is not new. From Cold War propaganda to today's digital disinformation, the weaponization of falsehoods has long been a tool for political manipulation. However, what differentiates modern disinformation is its scale and speed, facilitated by social media platforms. Aili Mari Tripp has argued for inclusive and transparent communication tailored to local contexts.<sup>28</sup> In Uganda, this could involve leveraging grassroots communication networks to counter incendiary narratives and promote early warning systems for electoral violence. Community engagement and WhatsApp-based fact-checking initiatives offer practical avenues to counter disinformation while strengthening trust in democratic processes.



## Internet Shutdowns and Network Disruptions

During the 2021 general elections, a nationwide 5-day internet shutdown was implemented. This action disrupted communications, the economy, education, and healthcare, all of which had increasingly relied on digital platforms, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Economically, the shutdown severely impacted businesses dependent on internet services for operations such as e-commerce, mobile money transactions, and online marketing. NetBlocks estimated that the Ugandan economy lost approximately \$10 million over the five-day shutdown.

With schools closed due to COVID-19, many educational institutions have adopted e-learning platforms to continue teaching. The internet blackout halted these online education efforts, disrupting learning for countless students. Similarly, the healthcare sector, which had integrated digital technologies for telemedicine, health information dissemination, and coordination of COVID-19 response efforts, faced significant challenges.

Notably, this shutdown occurred on the eve of the election, a time critical for disseminating real-time information and facilitating civic engagement. While officially justified as a measure to address security concerns, the timing and scope of the blackout suggest it could have been strategically deployed to suppress dissent. These events are not without precedent. In 2016, access to social media platforms and mobile money services during elections was blocked, citing security concerns. In 2011, SMS messaging was blocked.

As Uganda approaches the 2026 elections, tailored internet strategies that develop clear guidelines for ethical social media use during political campaigns and preserve digital freedoms can help harness social media's potential for good.

## Conclusion

Social media's role in shaping democratic processes in Uganda is transformative. This research has illuminated the complex interplay between digital platforms, political engagement, and electoral integrity in the Ugandan context. The evolution of social media use demonstrates the country's rapid digitalization of political discourse. This shift has opened new avenues for civic participation, information dissemination, and digital activism, particularly among Uganda's youth.

Democracy has continuously evolved in response to challenges, and disinformation is no exception. Disinformation thrives on vulnerabilities in information ecosystems, exploiting gaps in media literacy, trust, and discernment. Yet it simultaneously highlights the importance of prioritizing critical thinking and promoting digital resilience. Echo chambers, often criticized for reinforcing biases, can also serve as networks of trust where individuals rally around shared values and truths. While these spaces risk amplifying division, they offer connectivity and collective action opportunities. When leveraged positively, tightly knit digital communities can create movements that





challenge disinformation and amplify credible narratives.

Whether online discourse undermines or reinforces democracy depends on how societies leverage digital challenges to build resilience, foster trust, and strengthen civic engagement. The actual test lies in our collective ability to discern, adapt, and harness the opportunities within these challenges. In this way, the forces that threaten democracy can become the catalysts for its renewal.

The goal is to create a digital political environment that reflects and enhances Uganda's democratic aspirations—inclusive, transparent, and conducive to constructive political dialogue. As social media continues to evolve, so must strategies for effectively integrating it into the democratic process. This research contributes to that ongoing effort, providing a foundation for future studies and policy initiatives to bridge digital and democratic spaces in Uganda and beyond.

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