

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Social Media, Cyber Battalions, and Political Mobilisation in Ghana*

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“Ultimately, any politician who tries to downplay or underestimate the influence of social media does so at his own risk, because when things get off on social media, it looks like the proverbial harmattan and dry season. It is virtually uncontrollable.”

Political activist, Tamale, 27 June 2019.

SUMMARY

The use and abuse of social media in politics is a subject of increased interest around the world. Social media has attracted much attention both for its capacity to facilitate mass organisation for social change, and for its use to spread targeted, divisive, misleading, or overtly false content.

This report provides an overview of the mixed impact of social media on politics in Ghana – a country that is often held up as a shining example of democracy in Africa, with its stable party system, closely-fought elections, and regular peaceful transfers of power. Whether Ghana continues to maintain this reputation depends in no small part on how successfully the country navigates the challenges to democracy in the digital age.

It is clear that social media is playing an increasingly important role in Ghanaian electoral politics. Moreover, given the ways in which messages and stories are shared and discussed, its significance is far greater than internet penetration figures alone would suggest. The fact that elections – from party nominations to presidential and parliamentary contests – are often extremely closely fought also means that, while a politician cannot rely on social media alone, an effective use of platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp can help to make the difference between winning and losing. Given the (perceived) importance of social media to politics, there is heavy investment in this space.

There are many positives to how social media is impacting politics in the country. Politicians and their supporters are using social media to inform and educate, to organise political meetings and protests, and to mobilise support. These activities can ensure that information is distributed more widely, encourage greater and more informed participation, further boost voter turnout, help to hold leaders to account, empower political activists, and strengthen certain previously marginalised voices.

Yet, there are negatives as well. The fact that social media is generally leveraged to bolster existing campaign strategies is further exacerbating a number of problems. First, because the use of social media is an addition to, rather than a replacement of, older campaign strategies, it is further increasing the cost of (already hugely expensive) campaigns. The added expense only strengthens the position of wealthy politicians and the two main political parties to the disadvantage of the less well-off and smaller parties.

Second, because politicians and their supporters tend to use social media to signal status through interactions with constituents and influential figures, as well as showcase development activities, this further equates “good leadership” with being (seen as) a “good patron”. While citizens can use social media platforms to apply pressure on elected leaders, the fact that such pressure often consists of demands to engage in development projects may only bolster the existing patrimonial logics of day-to-day politics.

At the same time, the use of social media to de-campaign opponents ensures that rumours and misinformation, while far from a new phenomenon, can now spread further and more quickly. The ability to use fake accounts and pseudonyms, and the closed nature of popular WhatsApp groups, also renders such problems more difficult to tackle.

The digital age is also creating a new divide between first-hand and proxy social media consumers in Ghana, with far-reaching implications for politics, representation, and social relations. Inequalities in digital access and social media use exacerbate socio-economic divides in the country and restrict the ability of some citizens – most notably rural women – to exercise their voice and to engage in politics.

Finally, there are other problems that, while not emphasised by our interviewees at the time of the research, may be hidden from view or become matters of concern in the future. Examples include the use of big data to micro-target particular groups with divisive messaging or misinformation, the employing of spyware to hack ostensibly secure private messaging services such as WhatsApp, and the ability of big business or foreign powers to use social media to interfere with domestic political processes and outcomes.

The first section of this report outlines our methodology. Sections 2 and 3 present a brief overview of social media use and the relationship between social and traditional media in Ghana. Section 4 addresses the effect of social media on widening digital inequalities in the country. Sections 5 and 6 delve into the impacts of social media on politics and electoral campaigns. Section 7 discusses misinformation. Section 8 presents a number of positives stemming from expanded social media use and gives a number of reasons for cautious optimism. Section 9 provides a brief summary and Section 10 puts forward a number of policy recommendations drawing on the findings from the research.

01 METHODOLOGY

The analysis presented here draws on the authors' existing knowledge of Ghana, as well as 65 in-depth qualitative interviews and eight focus group discussions with politicians, campaign strategists, political communicators, political activists, youth group members, journalists and civil society workers conducted between February and July 2019.

The research was carried out in the capital city, Accra, and in Tamale and some of the surrounding areas. The report also draws on a custom survey of 1,600 respondents in Tamale Central, Tamale North, Tamale South, and Nanton parliamentary constituencies designed by the authors and conducted by IPSOS-Ghana in July 2019. All figures cited in this report refer to results from that survey.

Accra was selected so that the authors could engage with leading figures in the main political parties, civil society and media. In Tamale and its surroundings, on the other hand, the authors could study the dynamics of organization and mobilisation on social media in an increasingly competitive political space in a historically-marginalized part of the country. Tamale is Ghana's third largest city (population ~400'000 in 2013) and the second fastest growing metropolitan area in

the country.² It is the capital of the Northern region, which is among the poorest and least urbanized in Ghana with relatively limited infrastructure and communication networks, and lower literacy rates, particularly among women.³

In selecting Tamale and the surrounding constituencies as a case study area, the research has sought to uncover how citizens engage with social media beyond Ghana's capital city and in areas with relatively low digital literacy and internet connectivity. To our knowledge, no existing studies have addressed this question to date. The issue is central to tracing the impact of growing social media use on politics and social relations in the country, and to devising effective measures to harnessing the positives and tackling the negatives of the expanding digital space.



² Fuseini, Issahaka, 2017. "City Profile: Tamale", Cities 60: 64-74.

³ Ghana Statistical Service, "Urbanisation", October, 2014, available at <http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/fileUpload/pressrelease/Urbanisation%20in%20Ghana.pdf>

02 SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE IS GREATER THAN NETWORK PENETRATION

A second-hand smart phone can be bought for as little as GHS 60 (GBP 9 or USD 11) in the markets of Accra and an increasing number of people around the country are active on social media.⁴ The most popular platforms are Facebook and WhatsApp, with Instagram a distant third. Twitter is also gaining ground but is generally regarded as an "elite" platform.

Figure 1. Which social media platform(s) do you use?

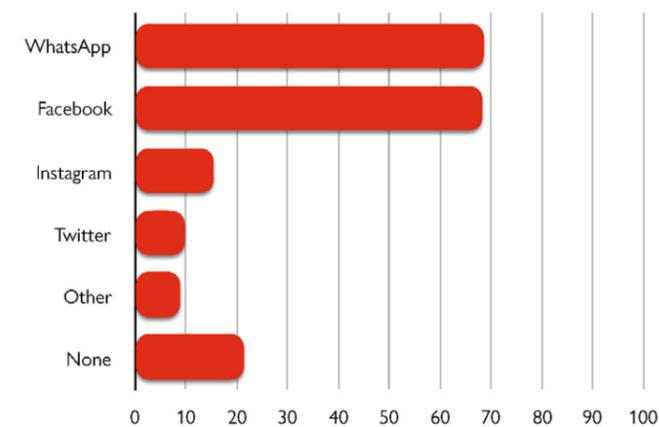
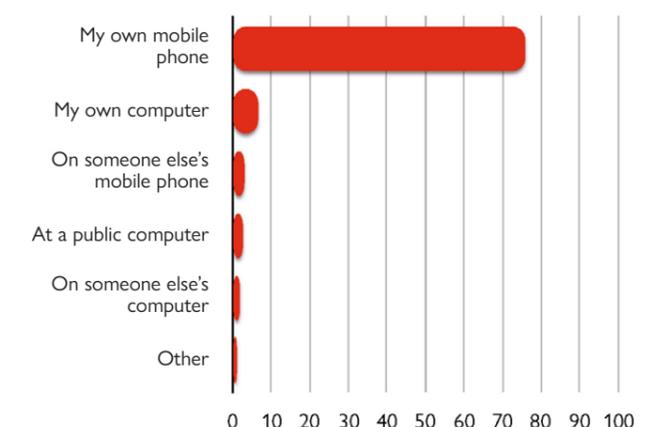


Figure 2. On what device(s) do you access social media?



■ Percent

⁴ Ghana is one of Africa's largest mobile phone markets with close to 34 million subscriptions and over 10 million active internet users (about a third of the country's population).

03

TRADITIONAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA ARE NOT SEPARATE SPACES

Many who use social media check their accounts multiple times a day and it is not uncommon for people to say that it is the first thing that they do when they wake up, and the last thing that they do before they go to sleep. But not everyone is online. Limited access to wi-fi, the high cost of data (1GB of data costs USD 3.60, which is roughly equal to two per cent of the monthly average income in Ghana),⁵ and poor networks across much of the country further reduces people's access to, and use of, social media. This is particularly true in rural areas.

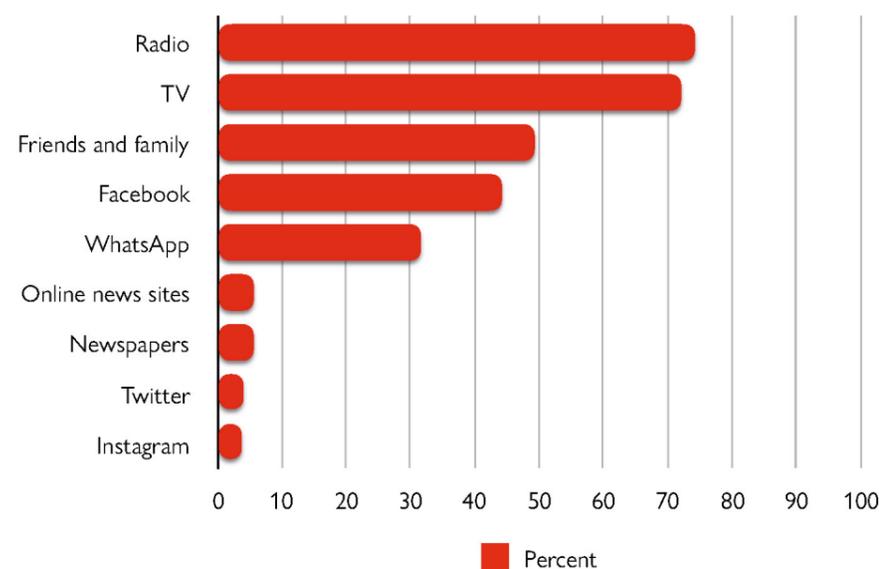
Such limitations notwithstanding, the spread of social media is far greater than what internet/smartphone penetration levels alone would suggest. First, those who do have access to social media expose others to online content: young people share stories that they read with their families; clergy discuss news in their places of worship; posts and tweets provide a popular subject for debate in markets and other public spaces. This spillover from online to offline social spaces is particularly important given that friends and family are a key source of news on politics and current affairs (Figure 3).

Given that the vast majority of stories aired on traditional media in Ghana now originate on social media, no-one is effectively isolated from its reach.

This does not mean that social media content reaches the broader public unfiltered, however. On the contrary, journalists must strike a delicate balance when selecting which social media messages to broadcast as they try to

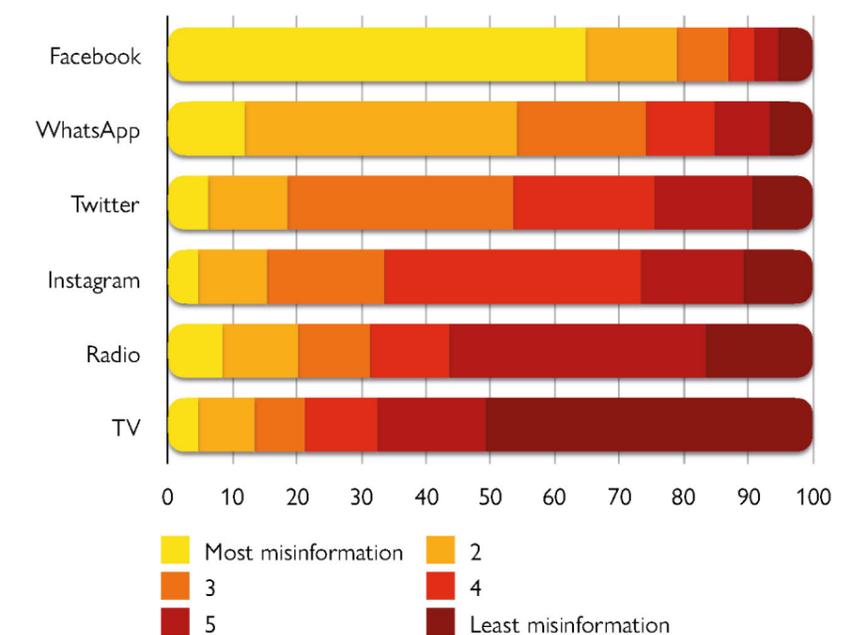
gain a reputation for "breaking news" while simultaneously trying to build and maintain a reputation as reliable and trustworthy sources of information.

Figure 3. Where do you mostly get news on politics?



Second, debates on social media help to set the agenda and to also shape the content of traditional media coverage – from print journalism through to TV and radio. Journalists we spoke to estimated that over 80 per cent of their leads for stories were sourced from social media.

Figure 4. Which platform contains the most/least misinformation?



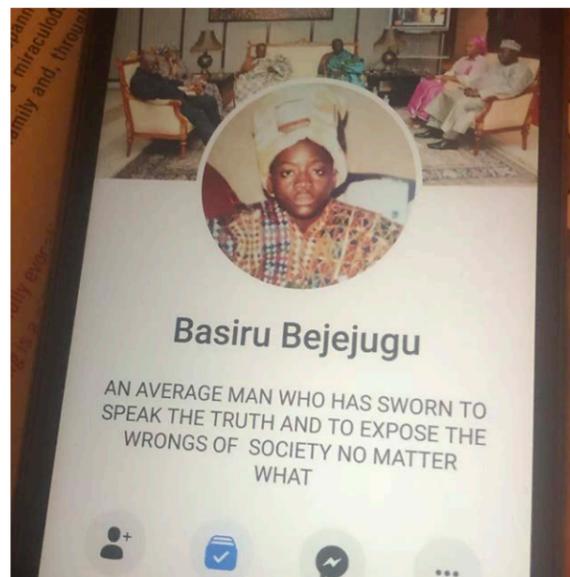
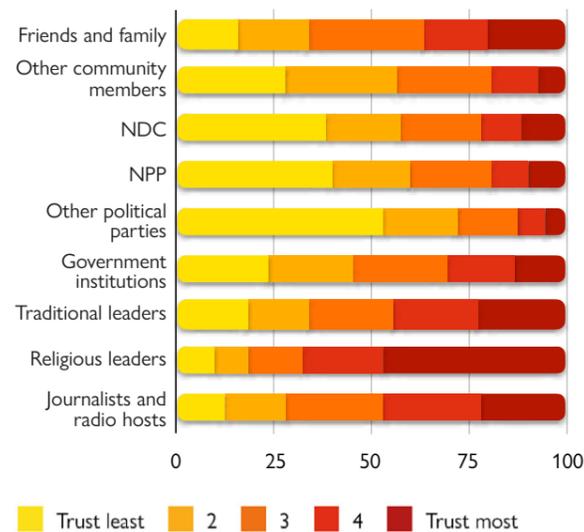
Traditional media sources enjoy relatively high levels of trust in Northern Ghana. Radio and TV are seen as containing the least amount of misinformation (Figure 4) and are trusted more than political parties, state institutions, traditional leaders, and even friends and family (Figure 5). Attention to traditional media appears to be driven precisely by the desire to hear from the "truth arbiters", but maintaining this status is treacherous.

The journalists we spoke to were keenly aware of the dangers of jeopardizing their reputation and were overall committed to maintaining it. Thus, they were selective of the social media content they discussed, and the manner, in which they discussed it. For example, Tamale's radio hosts were proactive in establishing cross-party WhatsApp groups and policing their tone and content.

⁵ Alliance for Affordable Internet, Mobile Broadband Pricing data for 2019, online at: https://a4ai.org/extra/mobile_broadband_pricing_usd-2019Q2

04 SOCIAL AND DIGITAL INEQUALITIES OVERLAP

Figure 5. How much do you trust information coming from the following sources?



A popular, but anonymous, social media account.

At the same time, journalists and media houses need to attract and retain an audience in an increasingly competitive media space – as of July 2019 Tamale alone has 16 radio stations. In such a context, journalists and media houses compete for listeners and followers (and the all-important advertising income that flows from the same). To this end, journalists solicit listeners online by themselves using social media in a number of ways. These include live-streaming programmes, advertising or summarising programmes aired, collecting comments and input from listeners, conducting online polls, and updating listeners on “breaking news”.

Journalists’ extensive engagement with social media, together with the fact that traditional media sources enjoy relatively high levels of public trust, ensures that many social media users select and circulate information from online news portals or official media sites (Ghanaweb, Myjoyonline, and Citinewsroom were the most frequently mentioned). There is thus a constant information loop between social and traditional media in Ghana.

However, the potentially positive nature of this loop is undermined by the limited resources media houses currently have for fact-checking, the little training that many journalists and radio hosts can draw on, and the fact that the most effective way to cultivate a loyal audience is to establish a reputation for being (among the) first to report on a sensational story. All these factors in tandem can encourage breakneck speed sensationalism, erode trust in traditional media, and push fact-checking to the background.

Digital inequalities matter for political participation, democratic representation, and civic engagement. As politicians, state institutions, and journalists increasingly seek to engage with citizens on social media, there is a real danger that inequalities in data access and social media use will lead to inequalities in voice and representation.

Our survey data from Northern Ghana show that there are dramatic differences across the population when it comes to monthly spending on data. Women spend less

on data per month than men (Figure 6), and there are stark differences in mobile data expenditure by education (Figure 7), age (Figure 8), and place of residence (Figure 9).

Figure 6. Monthly data expenditure by gender

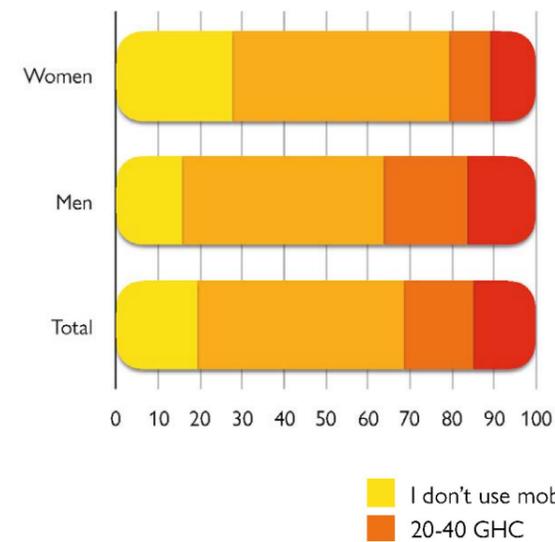
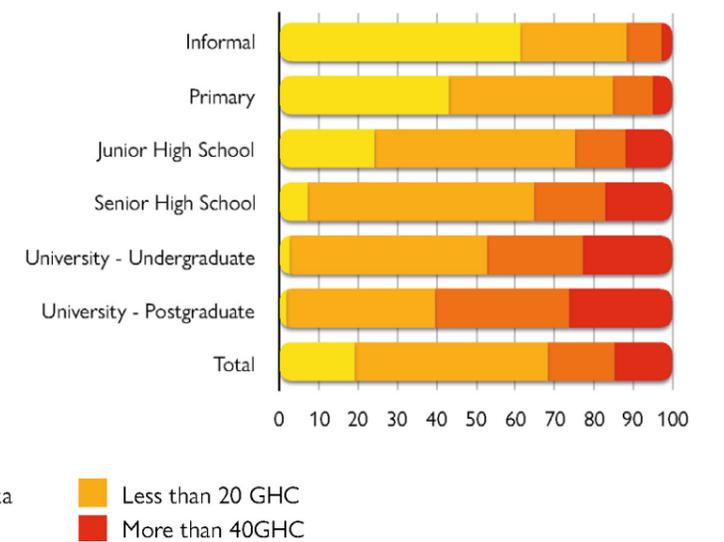


Figure 7. Monthly data expenditure by education



05

THE BIG TWO POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE MARKET FOR DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURS

Figure 8. Monthly data expenditure by age group

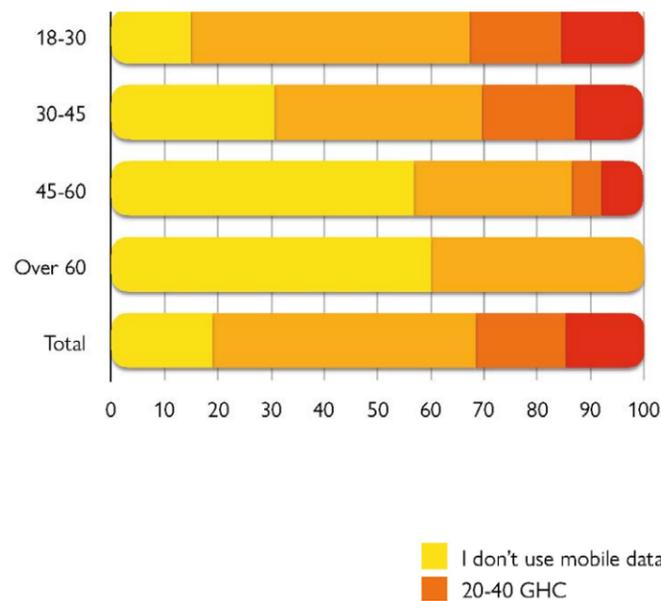
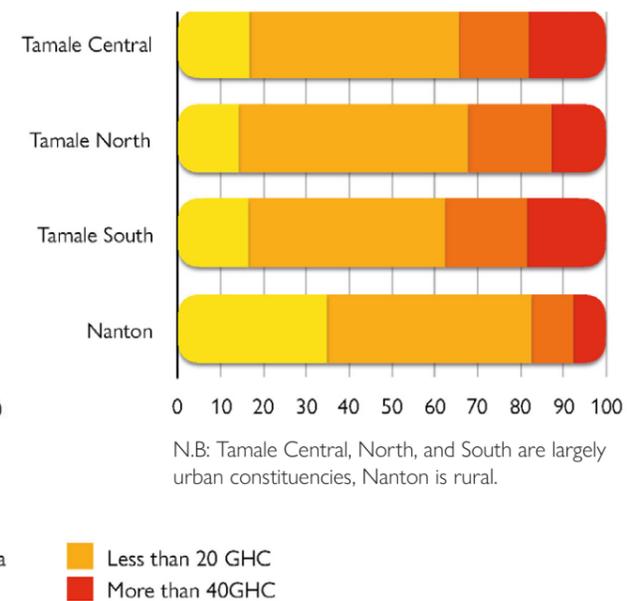


Figure 9. Monthly data expenditure by constituency



This uneven access prevents a large number of citizens from fully benefiting from what the internet can offer in terms of information, advocacy, and political action. While access is not fully prescribed for reasons described above, proxy access can hamper citizens' democratic participation and civic engagement and entrench existing inequalities by forcing already marginalized groups to rely on wealthier and more technologically-savvy family members or friends to act as "translators" of online content. Parties do attempt to create content that is accessible to proxy consumers (mostly by relying on photos and audio messages), but there is also a notion that proxy consumers are more easily fooled, which can be exploited for political ends:

"Some [illiterate voters] will not be able to read between the lines. Once they get the information, they go with it. And before you realize, a lot of damage is done. So, it was very practical in 2016."⁶

It is also clear that additional barriers to affordability, such as the new nine per cent tax on communication services that went into effect in October 2019, will compound existing digital inequalities and will be disproportionately felt in rural areas and among women, the elderly, and citizens with little or no formal education.

Ghana's two main parties – the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) – dominate the political space. In the 2016 elections they won over 98 per cent of the presidential vote and every single seat in parliament.

Both parties invested heavily in social media for those elections and their efforts have increased substantially since. Part of the reason for this is a widespread feeling that the NPP's more effective use of social media in 2016 contributed to Nana Akufo-Addo's electoral success:

"Because [the NDC] couldn't use social media effectively, they did some projects but it looked as if they did nothing [...] When we noticed a little mistake from them, it was what we hyped on social media. We used [social media] extensively and it contributed about 40% to our victory."⁷

The NPP executed a collective and targeted social media campaign strategy in the 2016 elections, and has since maintained that structure. The party has at least one social media communications officer at every level of the party structure (from the national office down to the regional and constituency offices). By mid-2019, they also had a "social media army" of over 700 people on small allowances.

The fact that these "social media communicators" are recruited on the basis of their vocal support for the NPP online – as well as the other potential opportunities that come from being a visibly effective party activist – also encourages others (who are not on an allowance) to actively promote the party and attack their opponents on social media.

The NDC was slower to recognize the potential of social media for electoral politics. The party's 2016 social media campaign was relatively disorganised and sporadic. Some individual politicians – government officials and members of parliament – had small teams of communicators who promoted their works on social media largely on a volunteer basis. The lack of a centralized and coordinated social media team created internal feuds between different social media factions within NDC who rivalled each other for the attention of the president. This likely contributed to confusion among supporters in 2016 and a decrease in overall turn-out among those who had historically voted for the party.

The NDC has now started integrating a coordinated social media communication teams into the structure of the party and is recruiting a large number of social media communicators, but they still have some way to go before they catch up with the NPP's social media "machine".

⁷ Authors' interview with NPP communicator, Nanton, 29 June 2019.

06 THE COSTS OF INCREASED INVESTMENT IN SOCIAL MEDIA

The growing perception of the importance of social media for politics and the two main parties' willingness to devote resources to campaigns online has created a market for digital entrepreneurs in Ghana, much like in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa. Technologically-savvy operatives (most typically young men) compete for the attention of local and national politicians in the hope of being put on salary. Many volunteer to create content promoting politicians (including setting up entire Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts on their behalf) and growing their social media following. Existing youth groups are repurposed to also operate in the new digital marketplace.

Not all entrepreneurial activity in the social media space has partisan motives, however: our interviews revealed that some social media activists seek to engage in a sort of digital protection racket: they extort money from politicians by using threats of circulating negative information (either true or false) online unless they get paid. Thus, social media is creating new opportunities for young people possessing a certain skillset, but there is also a danger of spurring a new type of digital political vigilantism.

Ghana's political parties are not currently experimenting with computational propaganda tools (using bots and algorithms) or fundraising on social media, although there is certainly interest in that direction. At the time of writing, there appears to be a person behind every account and every comment/like, which constrains virality and may limit the amount of circulating misinformation. Relatively expensive data is a disincentive for "click-bait" as the latter fails to generate the level of engagement necessary to be profitable. All of this may change with cheaper data in the future.



Local party office in Tamale.

This new digital marketplace creates a number of political challenges for the country's smaller parties (the CPP, PPP, PNC, APC, etc).

These parties are acutely aware of the potential benefits of social media and are also investing more in this space. Social media contributes to the survival of the smaller parties – it offers certain advantages, such as relative ease in the organisation of meetings and gatherings, and the maintenance of a public profile.

However, social media is not currently closing the gap between the "big two" and the smaller parties and might even be making it worse. The limited resources of the smaller opposition parties mean that they cannot invest in communications teams or "social media armies" to the same extent, nor can they generate the same level of voluntary engagement through digital entrepreneurs. Thus, it is difficult to carve out a space and to mobilise support. Because the NPP and NDC are able to provide financial and other resources to their social media teams, the smaller parties are under pressure to do the same, which compounds existing resource inequalities:

"If you don't have resources, how do you match them boot for boot? In 2016 we tried our best to use social media, but we were outnumbered, outresourced by competitors."⁸

And in a world where visibility is driven by numbers of likes and followers, the messages of the smaller parties get drowned out by the large and increasingly well-organised social media machines and the armies of hopeful volunteers of the big two. Finally, activists working for the smaller parties also sometimes get put off by the ferocity of attacks that they face online when they do criticise either of the two main parties.

While important, social media has not replaced traditional campaign activities – from donations and rallies to politicians' attendance of weddings and funerals and participation in discussions on the radio or TV. Having a strong social media presence has become a necessary, but insufficient condition for effective campaigning. As a result, the need to invest in social media constitutes additional work that has only increased the cost of campaigns:

"You cannot take social media to outdoorings, you cannot take it to a wedding. Even if you employ thousands of people to manage your social media, it is a must that you go to the outdoorings."⁹

⁸ Authors' interview with senior CPP communications strategist, Accra, 15 July 2019.

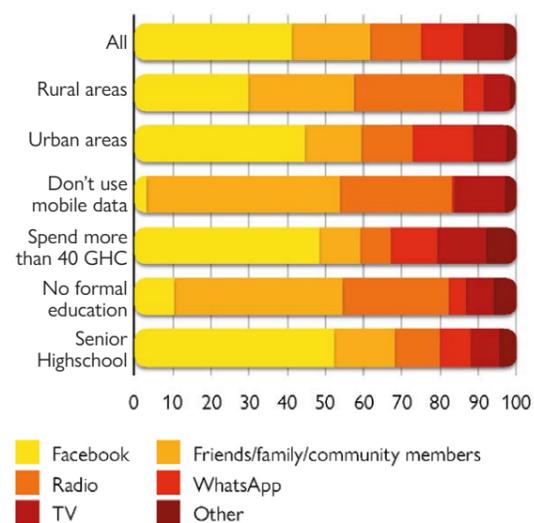
⁹ Focus group discussion with youth group members, Tamale, 26 June 2019.

07 MISINFORMATION IS COMMON

Interviewees and survey respondents agreed misinformation on social media – or “fake news” – was very common.

This ranges from outright lies to mischaracterizations, exaggerations, spin, or purposeful ambiguity. Over half of our respondents stated that they thought social media “sometimes” or “often” contains misinformation and many could provide a recent example of content they deemed fake news. We asked if they could recall where they first encountered recent fake news and the responses paint a picture of how misinformation transcends data and digital literacy boundaries in Northern Ghana:

Figure 10: Where did you first see recent examples of ‘fake news’?



While the plurality of our respondents said they first saw fake news on Facebook, offline social networks (friends, family, and community members) and radio were the main sources of misinformation in rural areas and among people who did not use mobile data and had little to no formal education (Figure 10). Efforts to battle misinformation thus need to take into account local differences in how misinformation spreads. In Ghana’s rural communities, these efforts should target communities, not only individuals.

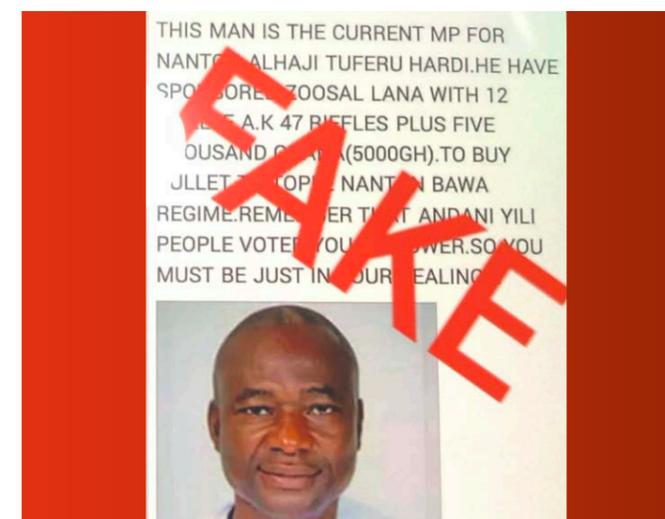
The range of fake news respondents cited is indicative of what types of misinformation is conclusively debunked. Examples include claims that are so outlandish so as to be obviously implausible: rumours of persons being killed, going missing, or being recovered/found alive, claims of completed development projects later found to not have begun, rumours of jobs and employment opportunities being offered later found to be unavailable. These are all outright lies or strong mischaracterizations, which are easy to fact-check and show to be demonstratively false. But the subtler forms of misinformation – exaggeration, spin, difficult to (dis-)prove allegations, ambiguous statements – are conspicuously absent from the list of conclusively debunked fake news our respondents provided. Half-truths are obviously much harder to dispel by producing concrete evidence.

Interviewees shared that misinformation is intended to serve a number of purposes and is tailored accordingly: to gain attention by becoming viral; to hurt an opponent; to counter an attack; to divert attention from an important issue; to confuse/“muddy the waters”; and to smear/delegitimise whistle-blowers: “If you can’t convince, confuse”.¹⁰ Further, there is a sense that – if the other side is believed to be using underhand tactics – then it is also necessary to engage in the same given the importance of winning. This encourages campaign efforts that rely heavily on de-campaigning.

There is also a worrying tendency to create and spread misinformation that could inflame latent chieftaincy and religious conflicts in Ghana’s North. Chieftaincy issues get significant traction on social media because of their highly emotive nature, so are an easy tool for those wishing to generate attention. In the words of a focus group participant:

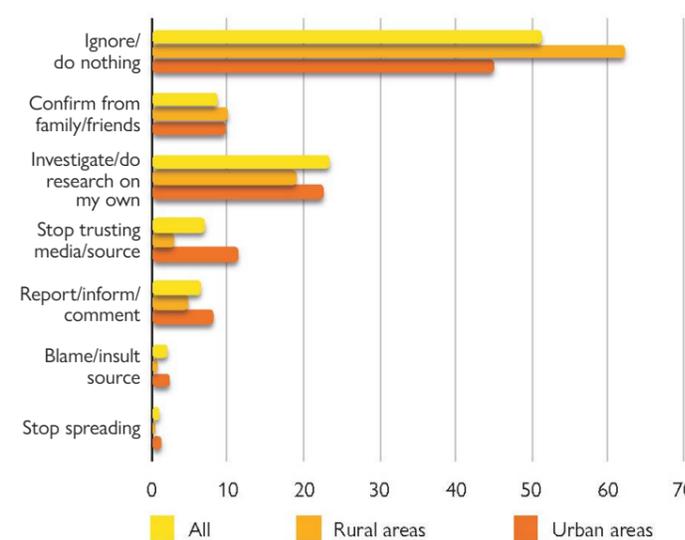
“[One thing that] trends most is chieftaincy issues on social media. When you post [on chieftaincy issues] the attacks and comments are just coming. [...] Because you are attacking my personality. It is my personality you are attacking. You are condemning it, you are destroying it.”¹¹

There may also be a more sinister motive behind such rumours – chieftaincy issues can be politicized in order to sow division between ethnic communities for electoral gain. There is a history of such tactics being employed during election campaigns in Ghana’s North¹² and social media provides an easy to use new medium where inflammatory content can be propagated while hiding behind the anonymity of ghost accounts.



One of the conclusively debunked chieftaincy rumours circulating on social media at the time of the research.

Figure 11: What would you do if you suspect something is ‘fake news’?



¹² Steve Tonah, “The Politicisation of a Chieftaincy Conflict,” Nordic Journal of African Studies 21, no. 1 (2012): 20–N.B: Categories are aggregated from open responses.

Once started, a rumour related to chieftaincy will spread extremely quickly and widely: at the time of the research for this project, a conclusively debunked rumour about the death of the Dagbon king was the most widely cited example of “fake news” respondents had recently encountered. It had spread quickly and gone beyond social media to reach communities living in remote rural areas via phone conversations and word of mouth.

Notwithstanding the level of Ghana’s democracy, many respondents still think social media usage in political activism can lead to political victimization in the form of attacks and hurt the prospects for job acquisition if the identity of the activists is known. This fear leads many activists to create pseudo or “ghost” accounts. Finally, when confronted with suspected misinformation, only about half of our respondents expressed willingness to seek confirmation, investigate further, or report/raise awareness (Figure 11).

We nevertheless find the responses encouraging. While there is undoubtedly some social desirability bias here, the responses reveal what are seen as appropriate reactions to misleading content on social media, i.e. a social norm around online communication. A little under half of respondents see themselves as taking action when faced with suspected misinformation. But in Ghana’s highly competitive media and political environment, turning off any supporters because of a reputation for fake news can be very costly. Our interviews suggest that media personalities, politicians, and political activists are all aware of this danger, which encourages caution and confines the most egregious form of misinformation to shadow or ghost accounts.

¹⁰ Focus group discussion with party communicators, Tamale, 27 April 2019.
¹¹ Focus group discussion with youth group members, Tamale, 26 June 2019.

08

SOME BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

We found several additional reasons for cautious optimism. There is a general disapproval of divisive and violent tactics, which helps to mitigate the extent to which politicians promote these directly with much of the more problematic messaging seemingly being posted and shared by supporters.

However, as a number of interviewees explained, the fact that the politicians seem not to sanction such behaviour suggests that they may be the ones directing or encouraging it.

A VIRTUOUS CYCLE

Most citizens, including people living in rural areas, feel that news on social media cannot be trusted. This scepticism, together with a willingness to seek further evidence or confirmation, ensures an ongoing role for traditional media and other actors. As already discussed, traditional media (radio, TV, and newspapers) enjoy high levels of public trust and are relatively effective “arbiters of truth”.

This trust helps to create a virtuous cycle whereby fact-checks – particularly when they come from established news stations – are often believed, and accounts shown to be spreading misinformation are shunned, which in turn dis-incentivises the open peddling of falsehoods: “When you are found posting [misinformation], people become disinterested in your post.”¹³

EMPOWERING YOUNG ACTIVISTS

While the rise of social media has exacerbated certain inequalities, it has also given new opportunities and power to the predominately young men who work as social media communicators. Some spoke of how this went hand-in-hand with greater respect and influence. However, it is important not to overstate this change: activists still largely work for wealthy politicians and depend on existing patron-client relations.¹⁴

FACILITATING LINKAGES AND OUTREACH

Social media is also serving as a platform for intra and inter-party networking. Political operatives can get to know others from within their parties and from across the political divide.

Locally-based activists find it easier to engage in political debates at the national level. Grassroots and national-level politicians are also able to interact and share ideas on group platforms. This is a significant departure from the past when very few could network across party lines, largely by being selected to appear on national radio or TV. Such networks are often established and sustained in the hope of future benefits when power changes hands. Regardless of motive, however, cross-party connections can facilitate political tolerance and guard against polarisation in the long run.

In addition, social media has made it possible for politicians to reach out to voters in what had previously been considered “unsafe” or “no go” zones or communities:

“During the campaign there are some politicians who cannot go to certain places. He cannot go but he can send his message to them through social media. You know, for NDC and NPP there are camps. [...] So, for instance, if you are [from the opposition party] and you want to do campaign in our community, it might be difficult for you, but if you post your message on social media, we will read it.”¹⁵

Such outreach can loosen the grip of established party networks and give citizens in non-competitive areas a political alternative. It could also discourage political vigilantism, which is largely sustained by the need to protect parties’ “vote banks” largely by intimidating opponents.

A FOCUS ON ATTRACTING NEW VOTERS HELPS TO MAINTAIN A LEVEL OF CIVILITY IN SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

Elections in Ghana are very closely-fought and parties compete for the support of the so-called “floating voters” (undecideds) and “entrants” (newly-enfranchised voters). Social media is seen as a key tool for growing party memberships among both groups and this goal influences the type of content that is communicated online:

“The aim of the party is to attract new members. So, if your agenda is to insult others, we will remove you from the platform. It happens very often, we remove people from the platform very often. [...]”¹⁶

The focus on expanding reach and on winning over new supporters through social media, combined with the belief that people will be put off by personality attacks and dirty tactics, creates strong pressures to maintain civility online:

“You have to fight [...] and win the public mind in the social media space. Sometimes, it gets so abusive. You have to pull your troops back. [...] One thing I keep warning our teams about is our sensibilities and sensitivities as a culture, and don’t be pulled, or dragged into a debate space that offends sensibilities. Otherwise, however valid your case, you would have lost.”¹⁷

Notably, the sanctioning of uncivil discourse can also extend to closed intra-party platforms on WhatsApp: “If you are used to insulting people on social media, even your party members are not so interested in your posts.”¹⁸

IMPROVING DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Ghana’s citizens can use social media to apply pressure on their elected politicians and political aspirants, for example by opposing things that politicians have done or are planning to do. Such pressure includes the #StopThatChamber campaign, which forced politicians to drop a plan for a new legislative chamber in 2019. This campaign had both online and offline dimensions as the hashtag activism was accompanied by scenes of activists being forcibly ejected from parliament, which were then aired and discussed on traditional and social media alike.

Citizens can also use social media to demand that politicians meet their manifesto pledges or that they deal with other issues within a constituency:

“For example, when a politician comes to Nanton and makes a promise [...] And then you vote for them and after a year, two years in power that promise has not been delivered. Especially when the promise came with delivery timelines. And you vote for such a political party, and the timeline passed without delivery. Such a thing when you put it on social media it is like hot ‘maha!’”¹⁹

In this vein, a number of politicians explained how they had been forced to find money for a particular development project – such as a road or bridge improvement – in order to silence popular criticism online.

¹³ Focus group discussion with NPP and NDC party operatives, Nanton, 29 June 2019.

¹⁴ A recent study on the role of WhatsApp in Nigerian elections reached a similar conclusion. See Jaime Hitchen, Idayat Hassan, Jonathan Fisher, and Nic Cheeseman, “WhatsApp and Nigeria’s 2019 Elections: Mobilising the People, Protecting the Vote”, University of Birmingham, July 2019.

¹⁵ Authors’ interview with a youth group member, Tamale, 14 June 2019.

¹⁶ Focus group discussion with NPP and NDC party operatives, Nanton, 29 June 2019.

¹⁷ Authors’ interview with senior NPP communications strategist, Accra, 11 July 2019.

¹⁸ Focus group discussion with NPP and NDC party operatives, Nanton, 29 June 2019.

¹⁹ Focus group discussion with NPP and NDC party operatives, Nanton, 29 June 2019.

09 CONCLUSIONS

Notwithstanding the positive outlined above, it is important to re-iterate that social media is decidedly a double-edged sword for politics in Ghana.

There are a number of potential dangers that demand attention: first, as we know from experience in other settings, trust in traditional media is fragile. Safeguarding it requires a proactive and coordinated response by individual journalists, media houses, political operatives, state institutions, and citizens. Ghana's journalists are widely expected to identify and call out misinformation, yet are woefully ill-equipped to do so.²⁰ Second, social media has become the medium of choice for propagating fake news, including content that could inflame chieftaincy disputes in Northern Ghana.

Fake news originating online easily spreads offline through tightly-knit communal networks and citizens with little to no formal education are particularly vulnerable. Third, social media compounds existing socio-economic inequalities in the country and risks translating unequal digital access to lack of political representation and voice. Fourth, social media is making election campaigns even more expensive and increasing the gap between the big two political parties and the smaller opposition parties. In the process, while initially improving parties' capacity for mobilisation and outreach, social media is also reaffirming, rather than supplanting, existing patronage logics of politics in Ghana.



²⁰ Kwami Ahiabenu, Gideon Oforu-Peasah, and Jerry Sam, "Media Perspectives on Fake News in Ghana", May 2018.

10 RECOMMENDATIONS

- Safeguarding trust in traditional media is paramount. We recommend that journalists and media houses be given support to fact check – for example, through less commercialised ventures and targeted media trainings. This support will help to guard against the impact of misinformation and maintain the relatively high levels of public trust in local and national media.
- Local social hierarchies can be engaged in fact-checking as well: for example, traditional and religious leaders often enjoy high levels of trust in rural areas.
- Encourage continuing scepticism of information on social media, teach citizens to recognize and report ghost accounts in particular.
- Work to establish and strengthen a norm against passively tolerating fake news. One potentially effective campaign could see this tied to notions of civic duty.
- Do not underestimate the communal aspect of the spread of misinformation: interventions should also target communities, not just individuals, particularly in rural areas and among low literacy voters.
- Improve digital literacy among women, in rural areas, and among citizens with little or no formal education with a view to more first-hand and critical engagement with online content.
- Keep the costs of interventions low – data-intensive fact-checking will be ineffective.
- Support smaller political parties to aid them in carving out space for their messages on social media. Encourage radio and TV hosts to feature communicators from the smaller political parties on air and to actively recruit them as part of cross-party social media groups.
- On the basis of the findings, we would advocate against interventions that seek to overly police or close down the social media space in Ghana, such as internet shutdowns or the regulation of who is permitted to post blogs. Such measures can easily be used to further strengthen incumbents and dominant political voices.
- It is important not to over-react to, or politicize, the need to contain the spread of misinformation. Such moves will be counterproductive and undermine trust in the very institutions tasked with sustaining democracy. Citizens should be trusted in their ability to filter out and sanction misleading and inflammatory content online, and equipped with the skills and information needed to allow them to effectively do so.

