

Optimization of Websites and the Use of Social Media in Political Communication

WORKSHOP WITH CHADEMA

On the 11th and 12th of July, KAS Tanzania and the KAS Regional Media Programme invited to a Media Workshop and therefore 30 young politicians of KAS' partner party CHADEMA from Dar es Salaam and the ten regions as established by CHADEMA, gathered in Dar es Salaam. The participants thus acquired new knowledge about the effective use of modern internet tools for political communication under the instructions of Christian Echle, who is the director of the Media programme in South.

In recent years the internet and social media have gained rapidly in popularity and constitute by now a common aspect of an average citizen's every day life. The digital era being a global phenomenon, East African civil life is nowadays also strongly characterized by the World Wide Web, especially because of the increasing prevalence of web-enabled smart phones which are particularly popular among the younger generation of Tanzanians. New opportunities arise with this recent trend, also for political parties which can make effective use of the internet in general and social media in particular as a political communication tool to reach voters and followers. Via the internet political parties can now directly address the citizens, not only in urban and politically vibrant areas but also in remote communities. More importantly, the internet allows political interaction to be retroactive. Voters can use social media platforms to give direct feedback to political parties and to express their concerns, fears and expectations of future political action. The direct

communication channel and the subsequent closer interaction between citizens and political decision makers is a big opportunity to further improve participation and transparency in any modern democracy. Ultimately, the internet and social media can also be used by political parties as a means to boost their image through online campaigns, as these can be conducted in an easy and cost-effective manner. However, despite these enormous opportunities the internet also poses immediate challenges to political parties, both administratively and technologically - websites must be regularly updated, content-wise and technology must meet the most current developments. Therefore political parties require information and professional knowledge on the strategic use of the internet and social media as a political communication tool.

The Workshop

Against this background, representatives of the KAS partner party CHADEMA highly welcomed KAS Tanzania's most recent workshop on "Website Optimization and the Use of Social Media for Political Communication" which took place on the 11th and 12th of July in Dar-es-Salaam. The attendance was impressive. The two-day workshop was organized by KAS Tanzania as part of the Election Bridge Africa brand, a political communication network established by KAS Media Africa. Christian Echle, director of KAS Media Africa and facilitator of the website optimization workshop thus updated CHADEMA representatives on the new trends of

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the use of the internet and social media for political communication. Participants were also given the opportunity to analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of CHADEMA's own internet presence. The constructive criticism was shared with Christian Echle. Therefore, participants and Christian Echle then jointly elaborated a plan to improve the party's website and its presence on social media platforms such as Facebook and twitter. Ultimately, the workshop thus provided representatives of CHADEMA with new knowledge on how to establish contact with the citizens through the internet, increase the party's presence in the public dialogue and enhance its general visibility.



Around 30 young politicians of CHADEMA attended the workshop.

The First Day

KAS media expert Christian Echle commenced the workshop by welcoming the representatives of CHADEMA and introducing them to the new dimensions of the internet and social media in the wider world in general and in Tanzania in particular. Accordingly, the internet nowadays offers opportunities not only to consume but also to produce news. 17 percent of all Tanzanians having access to the internet by now, digital tools may thus help CHADEMA to draw the public's awareness to issues that are otherwise being neglected by the mainstream media. Moreover, Facebook may be a strategic asset to political parties as 90 percent

of all Tanzanian internet users mainly consult this social media platform.

Learning from Best Practices

After having identified CHADEMA's digital toolkit, Christian Echle who is well-versed in online communication, proceeded jointly with participants to take stock of Africa's website landscape of major political parties. With the objective of drawing lessons from best practices, participants were asked to give comments on the various websites and to propose improvements. Thereafter, representatives of CHADEMA were encouraged to directly compare their own website with the considered examples as to then critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of their own web presence. Thus, participants were able to gain new insights on how to re-launch their party website to render it more attractive to the public and to best exploit the range of advantages that a party website offers.

CHADEMA's Webstrategie

The workshop took participants even beyond a general analysis of CHADEMA's online visibility. In the next step, representatives of CHADEMA were split into groups, each of them designing a web concept for CHADEMA. Every group then presented its respective web concept to the workshop participants and afterwards all participants jointly identified recurrent themes that may ultimately help CHADEMA's online communication and internet experts to devise more targeted web strategies in future. The last item on the day-one agenda was to reflect upon YouTube and Wikipedia - internet domains that tend to be neglected although they offer great opportunities for any political party to increase its online visibility.

The Second Day

While the first day of the workshop was primarily devoted to the analysis of new trends concerning the online presence of political parties, day two aimed at familiarizing participants with more practical

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aspects of using social media as a tool of political communication. In particular, participants were to learn how to use social media channels and advertising to bring direct messages to a target audience. Facebook being the most popular social media platform in Tanzania, Christian Echle explained the essentials of how to fully exploit the opportunities of this platform as a political communication tool. Additionally, participants were informed about the specific ways in which different social media platforms work. Twitter, for instance, has to be approached in a different way than Facebook since it only functions through the use of particularly short messages of 140 characters and the twitter-inherent hash tag button.

in their every-day use of the internet and the social media for political communication. Eventually, Christian Echle also highlighted the importance of consistent and coherent political messages as they provide the necessary basis for future improvement upon CHADEMA's general internet and social media strategy.

Lastly, participants were given the opportunity to give comments on the workshop and to evaluate its effectiveness in an anonymous manner. Considering the positive results, not only Christian Echle but also KAS Tanzania can be confident that the workshop reached its objective of providing an effective training on website optimization and the social media for political communication to the participants.



Christian Echle shows the worldwide spreading of the social media platform Facebook.

Evaluation and Closing of the Workshop

The workshop was closed by a wrap-up and an evaluation. Generally, the main observation of the workshop was for the representatives of the KAS partner party CHADEMA to learn in future from best practices: How do other political parties conceptualize their websites? How can CHADEMA use these insights in order to improve its own website? The above not with standing, Christian Echle also encouraged the participants to be creative

The workshop was part of a series of training and capacity building workshops of KAS and her Tanzanian partner party CHADEMA. The overall objective of this cooperation is to strengthen the participation and interaction between citizens and political decision makers and contribute to the further strengthening of the Tanzanian multi-party system. While KAS Tanzania concentrates on her partnership with CHADEMA, other German political foundations maintain similar partnerships and run training programs with other Tanzanian political parties, namely CUF partners with FNS; and CCM partners with FES. Together the German political foundations represent the diversity of the German multi-party democracy and try to contribute via international party partnerships to strengthen transparent, participatory and vibrant multi-party democracies world wide.

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