



VOICES FROM TANZANIA

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Social Media and Tanzanian Politics

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This article will provide an overview of Tanzania's use of social media and its impact on political discourse. First, we'll examine how widespread social media usage is currently compared to previous years. Following that, we'll talk about the government and its impact on social media, as well as how societies use these platforms. Dangers and risks are also discussed, as well as how politics has evolved as a result of new media.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the use of social media as a medium for communication and interaction has grown worldwide, including in Tanzania. Different stakeholders benefit from the new platforms. Nonetheless, everyone benefits from improved communication and organization. As new platforms enable access regardless of location, socioeconomic position, language, religion, or other factors, new opportunities to reach out to the masses, especially in Tanzania's case, the Tanzanian populace, emerge. This could pose risks in terms of cybercrime and information traceability in order to reach out to the entire community.

Social media serves as a globalization driver, bringing cultures and people closer together and facilitating simple communication between citizens all over the world. Tanzania's population and democracy are experiencing new impacts, as well as new access to new political ideologies. As a result, the following examines the impact of social media on politics and political debate.

2. The Immediacy of Social Media in Tanzania

Although the emergence of social media in Tanzania cannot be pinpointed to a certain period, it can be dated to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Because of technological advancements, the media landscape changed with its entrance. YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were news breakers long before traditional media like television, radio, and newspapers could grasp the concept. Next to the globally most successful social media pages, national social media platforms got implemented in the digital landscape. Such as the Jamii Forum, Michuzi blog, Mabadiliko forum, Milard Ayo blog and others. Other sites with added social media features include newspaper sites such as the Citizen, the Daily News and This Day (*Stelzner, 2014*). Beside technical innovations also heavy infrastructural investments in Tanzanian Infrastructure provoked a booming of social media and digital use. For example, in regard to fibre optic technology has made Internet service affordable and speedy in Tanzania. (*Mtweve, 2014; BongoToday, 2014; Tanzaniainvest, 2014*).

In numbers: In 2019, the data shows that Tanzania has a 46% internet penetration rate, which is significantly higher than the estimated African average penetration rate of 24.4 percent in 2018. In 2018, half of the 42 million mobile voice subscriptions registered accessed internet services, with over 95 percent of them accessing internet via mobile phone. (*Lihiru, 2021*). With the use of internet, the use of social media platforms increased. The most popular platforms in Tanzania are Facebook, Youtube, Instagram and Twitter, also Clubhouse and Tiktok are noting an increasing number of users during the last year. In December 2021 there were 5,223,000 Facebook users in the country, which accounts for about 8.5 percent of the entire population (*Internet World Stats, 2021*). Tanzania lags behind other African countries in terms of social media penetration, including Nigeria (15.1%) and Kenya (19%). (*Internet World Stats, 2021*). As the use of digital media and social media grows around the world, numbers change dramatically over time, and Tanzania is no exception.

3. Social Media Actors

Despite Tanzania's low social media penetration, social media has become an important tool for civic dialogue in recent years. It serves as a playground for civil society interaction, as well as increased political activity. In order to understand social media and its political relevance, we will look at two important actors on social media: government actors and individual civic actors.

a. Government

Over the past years, the digital political climate has evolved and developed. The government's interaction with social media has been rich in its variety. From individual social media use by heads of state to the government itself deciding on social media measurements.

During the last election period, the presence of parties and politicians on social media became larger and more competitive. Here, the media is being used to engage voters, commercialize oneself, and influence the mass media. Political parties, like CCM, Chadema, CUF to ACT-Wazalendo, have all used social media to promote their agendas to the voters and foster civic dialogue. (*The Citizen, 2020*). Nowadays, social media is highly integrated into the civic dialogue, so politicians have to speak out on the platforms in order to have an impact and use the benefit to speak directly to the public.

Regulations on social media have been changed during the different administrations. Especially while main political events are happening, for instance, elections, measurements on social media have been more restrictive.

For example, during elections in October 2020, the government was accused of blocking major social media platforms, including Twitter and WhatsApp, and filtering text messages containing the name of the major opposition presidential candidate and other key phrases (*Cross, 2021*). Though, social media platforms have been controlled earlier. Between 2015 and May 2020, at least 19 people were arrested for "insulting" the President on Facebook or within WhatsApp groups. (*Cross, 2021*). Especially for opposition parties, social media has become an insecure communication tool. For example, in 2015, 191 Chadema volunteers were arrested on suspicion of sharing "inaccurate" results over WhatsApp, and eight Chadema officials were charged with cybercrime. (*The Citizen, 2015*).

b. Society

The use of social media varies in Tanzanian society, from an economic use to a platform of civic dialogue and entertainment. But regarding politics, it provides opportunities for opinion sharing, information seeking, and getting oneself active in politics.

As a Tanzanian activist and leader of Cyber Lounge, stated, social media gives society a platform to criticize. Where newspapers are observed by the government, social media is more anonymous, which motivates voices that have been quiet in public before. Due to social media, the formation of groups around certain interests is possible. Though she states that becoming active and mobilizing users is difficult, many are interested in sharing their opinions, but when it comes to standing for them on the streets, it looks different. Furthermore, the activist sees the importance of social media in problematizing social issues while having the opportunity to listen to voices from all over Tanzania. It gives communities a voice that they have never had before.

The use of social media is especially in the urban sectors really high. As social media platforms are also used as a platform of information and discussion, rural areas lack in participation and solution about latest news. (Lihiru, 2021). This can have a bigger impact as it first seems. Regarding the COVID-pandemic information platforms and here especially social media turned out as an important way for health communication. Information about its dangers, incubation, treatment and symptoms. Not just in the civic dialogue also in important health questions and economic success rural areas are left behind. (Lihiru, 2021).

Also from the government, the division of society has been accelerated in the past years. For example, in 2018, a law was passed that required bloggers and content creators to register with the government and pay fees. With poorer people being barred from creating online content, the conversation about and in Tanzania is at risk of becoming an echo chamber for the upper class. (Dark, 2018).

As social media is not a filtered source and just follows a few regulations, there is also a high danger of false information spreading. Most of the news stories are retrieved from political stories, entertainment, and sports. ***Another impact of social media on society is due to its increasing consideration as a source for newspapers and columns in providing news stories. (Charles, Nyoni, 2019).*** As a result, information is being spread based on facts obtained from social media, and the risk of false information is increasing due to the ever-expanding range of social media-based information. Measures against this have been taken. For example, Facebook partnered with *Pesa Check*, an independent fact-checking organization in Tanzania, in order to review and evaluate the accuracy of content shared online. (The Citizen, 2020). Africawide, the platform *AfricaCheck* (www.africacheck.org), which partners with the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation (KAS) media programme, is another non-partisan organisation that exists to promote accuracy and honesty in public debate and the media in Africa. *AfricaCheck* raises the quality of information available to society across the continent.

4. Dangers

In addition to the opportunities that are given and gateways to new ways of communication, dangers increase as well. Starting with the previously mentioned restrictions on free speech on social media platforms, private communications can be easily observed and controlled by the government, indicating a danger in the power that the government is given. restrictions on political freedom can increase and threaten equal participation in

democracy of the parties and opinions. Furthermore, restrictions can increase the social split between the poor and the wealthy, thereby ignoring grievances.

Another danger is cybercrime, which is increasing due to increasing digitalization. Since 2009, cybercrime has increased in East Africa when high-speed fibre optic cables enabled faster broadband connections. Almost all crime, about 80%, involves some element of cybercrime. Phones and platforms are being used to communicate with victims. Cybercrime touches almost every area of life. Cybercrime includes false, deceptive, misleading or inaccurate information or content intended to defame, threaten, abuse, or insult. (*Cross, 2021*).

Concluding, with the danger of false information, which increases in social media due to unfiltered platforms. These spread even faster as newspapers, other news portals, and the media have started to rely more on social media as an information platform.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, social media offers opportunities for participation, political content, and citizen inclusion. It provides a space where politicians can interact closer to civic dialogue, and, due to interaction, citizens are able to form their own political interests and opinions. Form groups of interests and problematize society's problems. But social media has to be regarded with caution. False information leads to a mistaken formation of opinion. Government parties and actors can limit content so that only the parts of the story that the government is interested in are shown to the public. Not all voices are allowed to speak equally. This is questioning the use of social media as a useful tool for a democracy like Tanzania's, where not all citizens can take part in the civic dialogue due to income and access.

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