

Social media in Uganda: revitalising news journalism?

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Abstract

The article discusses the role of social media in relation to the traditional journalistic sphere in Uganda. Through an analysis of how journalists in three Ugandan newspapers use social media in their daily work, the article discusses how social media affect conventional sourcing practices, reportage and professional norms. The article is particularly interested in how Facebook and Twitter serve as alternative channels through which sources with less access to traditional means of communication get their message(s) across to journalists. The findings are discussed in light of the present development of social media legislation in Uganda. The discussions feed into a larger reflection on social media's potential to create avenues of access in a semi-democratic setting where attempts to curtail media freedom and freedom of expression are frequent.

Keywords

digital divide, freedom of speech, journalism, news sourcing, social media

Introduction

Uganda was one of the first countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to be connected to the Internet in 1993. In an early phase, expansion was brought about by reductions in mobile

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telephone tariffs and bandwidth prices, new policies and increased literacy in information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Freedom House, 2012). Furthermore, the proliferation of cell phones fuelled Internet growth in the region as such (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Since the colonial era, print media have played an important role as sources of information and means of expression in Uganda. As the digital increasingly takes prominence in everyday life and work, this article questions how this development has affected journalistic newsgathering practices, and in particular, how print journalists in Uganda use social media in their routine news coverage. Hence, the main research question is the following: How do social media open for new practices in journalistic sourcing? Central sub-questions are as follows: To what extent and in what ways are social media sources cited in the print news articles? and What issues arise from the appropriation of social media sources?

Sourcing is an elementary news practice which journalists undertake to access information, provide perspectives and/or validate news (Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973). Sources are interviewees who are quoted in newspaper articles and those who supply background information and story ideas. Journalists choose specific sources based on their suitability for a story to provide information as representatives of organised or unorganised groups. Sources such as public relations managers, communication practitioners, politicians, trade unionists, experts and ordinary people provide journalists with the raw material for making news. Journalistic output is a result of transactions between journalists and their sources and how journalists deal with their sources.

Taking sources and the process of journalistic sourcing as its point of departure, this article analyses particular aspects of the relationship between social media and legacy media in Uganda, against a background of the overall situation for social media use in the country.¹ It examines the deployment of social media for sourcing in day-to-day news coverage and the implications thereof for professional journalism and for spreading alternative news and perspectives in the context of Uganda.

ICTs are still not as widely accessible as the traditional mass media, in this case radio. Most people get their news from radio and television and newspapers, in this order.² It is of great interest to get more knowledge on the impact of social media on the traditional media. Although newspaper readership remains relatively low due to a poor reading culture and poverty in Uganda,³ newspapers are important as they reach the agenda setters, and not least since the plethora of radio stations, with almost universal access, often get their news from the newspapers. Owing to the understanding that social media have pervaded conventional journalism and, therefore, have implications for the development of journalism, the investigation seeks to (a) examine the application of Facebook and Twitter in sourcing and (b) examine social media's contribution to journalistic sourcing practices and reportage in a semi-democratic setting.

According to Diamond (2002), semi-democratic states are pseudo-democratic with existence of formally democratic institutions in addition to multiparty electoral competition. However, they lack an arena of contestation, sufficiently open, free and fair elections so that the ruling party can readily be turned out of power if it is no longer preferred by a plurality of the electorate (Diamond, 2002; Joseph, 2011).

Whereas Internet access in Uganda is still low compared to the rest of the world, penetration has grown steadily, and mobile phone subscriptions grew from less than one million in 2001 to over 24.3 million in 2017 (Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), 2017). A growing number of Ugandans own smartphones, which enable them to browse the Internet. The arrival of fibre optics technology has also contributed to that growth. According to Internet World Stats (2019), 40.5% of the country's population of about 45 million people has Internet access.

Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1986 and is among the longest sitting presidents in Africa. He has on several occasions attempted to influence the use of social media in his country. For example, during the 2016 general elections, the government blocked access to social media to prevent the organisation of protests, silence support for his opposition and discourage voting (Omar, 2016), and in 2018, the president introduced a social media tax that received a lot of complaints, and that we will return to later in this article. On his own blog, Museveni describes social media as a luxury good comparable to beer, tobacco and perfume, noting,

Internet use can be sometimes for educational purposes and research. This should not be taxed. However, using Internet to access social media for chatting, recreation, malice, subversion, inciting murder, is definitely a luxury.⁴

Methods and data selection

The article focuses on three newspapers: *New Vision*, *Daily Monitor* and *The Observer* and draws on content analysis for a period of 52 weeks, the printed copies that were published in 2014 (a total of 219 issues: *New Vision* 90, *Daily Monitor* 90 and *The Observer* 39), combined with focus group discussions, qualitative interviews and informal observation. The data were collected in Kampala where the newspapers' offices are based. Content analysis was employed to generate evidence of use of social media sources in newspaper articles. Numerical data and descriptions were generated to demonstrate and comprehensively explain the extent of social media's influence on news journalism. Content analysis is also used to identify and quantify the number of articles that quoted social media sources; the type of stories in which social media sources were cited; the most common social media sites used; the nature of sources quoted from social media as well as their gender.

However, analysing published articles to ascertain the extent of use of social media sources is probably not enough to fully understand journalists' use of the platforms in newsgathering. That would be to overlook the fact that sourcing is a process that takes place at different levels including the news discovery and the newsgathering stage (McManus, 1994).

In addition, journalists do not always explicitly cite their sources in their articles due to several reasons, some of which relate to their professional ideals. Hence, in addition to the quantitative analysis, focus groups discussions (FGD) and in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out. The FGDs were conducted in the first phase of the research process to generate information about the extent of penetration of social media in the

newsrooms before narrowing down to the question of sourcing. Since group interviewing is regarded as a useful technique for getting information about topics that have not yet been (fully) explored (Reinard, 2008: 225), two such interviews were carried out to generate information about social media use in the newsrooms. After having conducted the content analysis, snowball sampling was carried out: the first interviewees recommended fellow journalists who could provide more insights useful for the project. This strategy was very helpful as some of the analysed articles did not have by-lines. Snowball sampling also helped to generate more participants, as some of the prospective respondents who were generated through the content analysis had either left the newsrooms or were not available for interviewing. In all, 25 reporters and 19 editors from the three newspapers were interviewed, making a total of 44 interviews. The interviews were carried out between May 2015 and March 2016 and were semi-structured. We followed an interview guide in order to get answers to the same questions from all interviewees while also being able to pursue the particularities of each interview. We were especially interested in getting new knowledge about the sourcing practices in general and the use of social media in particular. Of course, neither journalists nor editors are neutral interviewees – they are strategic decision makers who need to justify their conclusions both in present time and at a later stage. Nevertheless, the interviews provide interesting data material on aspects of news production that we would otherwise be unable to research.

Networked news production: social media and journalistic sources

Social media are an important research object for journalism not only because news content is shared on them but also because news emerges and may be shaped through interactions within social media. Research on journalistic sources has expanded to include social media (Domingo, 2020: 200) and the study of reporters' news sources often draws its roots from questions about bias, power and influence (Berkowitz, 2020). Social media can be avenues to fellowship, to share contacts, information and discuss professional matters. So far, research into the relationship between conventional journalism and social media in Uganda has mainly focused on the attention that mainstream media give to social media platforms to highlight their growing importance to the news business and to professional journalism. Established news organisations launched Facebook pages and Twitter accounts for monitoring, interacting with and obtaining feedback from their audiences (e.g. Chibita and Kibombo, 2012). They have integrated social media in their operations for marketing purposes, to engage their online readership and for newsgathering. For example, at *New Vision* newspaper, social media use is compulsory for journalists, while at *Daily Monitor* and *The Observer*, reporters actively use Facebook and Twitter for journalistic purposes. In 2016, *Daily Monitor* unveiled its digital first strategy in response to changing trends in the production and consumption of news. The newspapers' social media accounts are run by strategically organised teams of tech-savvy journalists and non-journalists and *Daily Monitor* has the largest social media following in the country.⁵ However, how Ugandan journalists use social media in their daily work has not yet been studied.

In other African countries, research indicates that journalists use social media in their work (Jordaan, 2014; Mabweazara, 2010, 2014; Rodny-Gumede and Hyde-Clarke, 2014). Just like scholars in other settings observe, some of these studies emphasise that the use of social media promotes the sourcing of stories from an elite minority with access and means to maintain sustained visibility on social media (Mabweazara, 2014: 79). Mabweazara's study of Zimbabwe's mainstream press in the age of social media is particularly interesting in how it mirrors Robinson's (2011) view that technologies reinforce traditional norms as much as they enact change. A central point of concern for the relationship between reporters and sources is that, if the journalistic paradigm calls for turning to authoritative news sources, then those believed to possess authority will have a better chance of having a voice in the news (Berkowitz, 2020). From Sigal's (1973) study of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to current scholarship, international research shows how mainstream news media rely heavily on official and elite sources. An important question in studies on the relationship between journalists and their sources is whether alternative practices of sourcing may result in a larger variety of voices.

The sociology of journalism and the actor–network approaches consider technology as one of the social determinants of journalism with consequences for news media. For example, McNair (1998) argues, 'technology is beneficial to news media but can also force unsettling changes on working practices and routines and subsequently come to be a threat to practitioners' (p. 125). Proponents of the actor–network theory also suggest that technologies are actors in a network that constitutes journalists and their media institutions, sources, audiences and the wider society (Hemmingway, 2008). According to technological determinism, developments in technology determine social change. Technology has 'effects' on societies that are inherent, rather than socially conditioned or that society organises itself in such a way to support and further develop a technology once it has been introduced. Technological determinism stands in opposition to the theory of the social construction of technology, which holds that both the path of innovation and the consequences of technology for humans are strongly if not entirely shaped by society itself, through the influence of culture, politics, economic arrangements and the like. Existing research indicates that journalistic work is a complex interaction between professional, organisational, political, economic and social factors (Hanitzsch and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020), but also that the institution of journalism is increasingly challenged by 'economic, technological, and political transformations' (Reese, 2019).

News production and journalistic practices are not a solely technology-driven process, but also a result of actions undertaken in specific newsrooms under specific circumstances by journalists who, according to Domingo (2008) 'have a professional culture, knowledge and expectations' (p. 681). This article adopts the sociology of journalism to mitigate some of the limitations of technologically deterministic theories and as a way of acknowledging that journalism in Uganda is better explicable through contextual factors. At the same time there is no doubt that the ongoing digital revolution is, as in the words of Craig (2020), 'profoundly transforming every aspect of journalistic practice', as the rise of social media has 'altered the media ecology in which journalism functions' (p. ix). Nevertheless, instead of viewing digital technologies as playing an all-powerful role in

Publication	Frequency	Percent
New Vision	67	52,3
Daily Monitor	42	32,8
The Observer	19	14,8
Total	128	100

Figure 1. Title of publication and articles citing social media sources.

shaping journalistic practice, this article treats them as an important part of a network in which several factors contribute to news production.

Findings – social media sources in print newspapers

An analysis of the sample of 219 print newspaper issues drawn from the three publications produced 128 print articles in which social media sources were explicitly quoted as summarised in Figure 1.

The figures imply that each of the newspapers under study runs an article citing a social media source once or twice a week. There were notable differences among the three newspapers. More than half of the articles citing social media sources (52.3%) were published in *New Vision*, while *The Observer*, representing the least number of articles, had 14.8%. The difference can be explained based on the newspaper size and the editorial strategies of the publications. A printed *New Vision* paper is much bigger in terms of pagination, averaging 56 pages compared to 45 and 35 pages, respectively, for *Daily Monitor* and *The Observer*. This means that *New Vision* carries more articles on a given day than its two counterparts, which may translate into having more articles citing social media sources. In addition, it seems the integration of social media use into performance targets for *New Vision* journalists encourages the citing of social media sources. We found a repeated pattern in which comments from social media sources were published alongside stories from parliament every weekday during the sample period in *New Vision*. Interviews with concerned journalists and editors revealed that the newspaper had an explicit policy to include views of ordinary citizens from Facebook in the political stories.

Half of all the articles citing social media sources (50%) covered entertainment and lifestyle, while 34.4% covered politics and parliament, an indicator that social media sites are sources of both hard and soft news. The hard news in this study included politics and parliament; business; health; crime and police; education and science and technology. Half of the articles that cite social media sources are soft news. They included articles about music artists and generally human-interest stories. A breakdown of newspaper title and beat indicates that *New Vision* accounted for 79.5% of all articles covering politics, while *Daily Monitor* accounted for 5 in every 10 articles covering entertainment and lifestyle.

The dominance of politics and entertainment articles in the sample is evidence that reporters for these beats regularly use social media to search for relevant material to use in their reportages. They monitor online activities of public officials, government and

Social Media Type	Frequency	Percent
Facebook	92	71,9
Twitter	12	9,4
Both Facebook and Twitter	14	10,9
Other	10	7,8
Total	128	100

Figure 2. Social media type cited in selected articles.

opposition politicians, political parties as well as celebrities in entertainment circles. This finding also reflects Uganda's media and the general public as paying more attention to politics and entertainment than the other news beats, as reflected in an interview extract below by *Daily Monitor* managing editor:

Ugandans seem to be fascinated by politics and they are always tweeting what they think, what they have seen and heard [. . .] The other section is entertainment and fashion as people are always talking about what is happening over the weekend, who was where and what [. . .] (Personal communication, 15 June 2015)

Perhaps the most surprising finding was that the sample did not yield any sports stories that cited social media sources; yet several respondents covering the beat said they heavily rely on social media in sourcing their beat. But the absence of articles quoting social media sources does not necessarily mean that platforms do not have an influence on sports (or any other beat) reporting as empirical research from other contexts indicate that sports journalists and personalities widely use social media (Broersma and Graham, 2013; Lichterman, 2014).

Interestingly, there were indications that social media sources are included in breaking news on the newspaper websites and social media accounts, but are sometimes replaced with more conventional sources when stories are developed for print. This may explain why the quantitative content analysis yielded fewer articles citing Facebook and Twitter sources compared to journalists' reported use of the applications for sourcing.

Reliance on social media in sourcing

Whereas most international scholarly literature concentrates on Twitter as a tool for news reporting (Broersma and Graham, 2013; Vis, 2013), the analysis revealed that Uganda's newspaper journalists use Facebook much more often than Twitter or any other social media platforms in order to get access to sources. The majority of the 128 reviewed articles (71.9%) cited Facebook sources and this corresponds well with the data from interviews in which journalists indicated a significant preference for Facebook over Twitter (Figure 2).

Most newspapers exhibit convergence traits with websites and a social media presence, and Ugandan newspapers are no exception. The newspapers under investigation

here have web pages plus active Facebook and Twitter accounts. Their social media accounts, websites and print publications are interconnected. For instance, if *New Vision* posts on their Facebook page about an occurrence, clicking on the link directs a reader to their website. Social media are institutionalised and their deployment is confined to what the news organisations define as right or wrong. In interviews, journalists and editors explained how the media houses' policies encourage journalists to use social media as tools for communication and for engaging with audiences but also set the confines within which journalists operate. They, for instance, regulate journalists' dual personality online, reminding them of their responsibility as employees first and private individuals second. As employees, journalists are bound by rules and regulations, which they must observe to keep their jobs. The policies dictate how journalists use social media and how they deal with the content retrieved from them. This finding is a confirmation that journalistic routines relating to sourcing, the tools employed and which sources get quoted are determined by newsroom policies, professional norms and ethics. It also highlights the influence of professional and institutional requirements on journalistic work routines, in which the methods of work are standardised and routinised (Schudson, 2003).

The increasing reliance on social media sources was prompted by the need for the journalists to meet a vast requirement for news stories as well as expectations on including more diverse voices and perspectives in the public sphere. In interviews, journalists told that a story is not considered comprehensive unless it reflects views of the social media 'public', and explained how editors often asked reporters to consider the social media public opinion while writing stories. Monitoring and combing through social media for posts and comments, is part of the journalists' job description. Social media, which are accessed through desktop computers, laptops, tablets and mobile phones, are entrenched in journalists' daily work routine. Journalists explained in interviews how sourcing from social media entails monitoring posts and tweets of users in their social networks for possible story leads. It also involves carefully selecting and cultivating sources. The research established that whether on duty or not, journalists closely monitor social media to keep abreast with local and international issues, for story ideas and background information. The journalists acknowledged that they could not be everywhere at the same time and that while they were in newsrooms or at home, something newsworthy was happening somewhere. A reporter at *Daily Monitor*, for instance, said that she bought a smartphone to be up-to-date with happenings on social media to perform better at work.

Sourcing from social media raised ethical issues among the journalists and editors. The ethical concerns related to how social media deployment challenged journalism standards of accuracy as well as established professional practices such as verification and shoe-leather reporting. Several ethical-related issues were expressed in interviews, such as (a) picking of comments from social media and including them in newspaper discourse without the source's consent; (b) using material from the online platforms without crediting them; and (c) communicating to sources via social media and using material from such interactions for journalistic purposes without their knowledge or consent. Verifiability of the social media sources was mentioned as an additional challenge as the journalists often perceived social media sources as difficult to verify, unreliable and lacking in credibility.

Information sourced from social media

Apart from information in text format, the findings indicate that Ugandan journalists occasionally obtain pictures, videos and audio documents containing newsworthy information from social media. One respondent from *The Observer* illustrated a story about Uganda's involvement in Somalia in which they interviewed an army official. The story was published with pictures that had been posted on the source's Facebook page (Mugisha, 2013). This finding emphasises the network(ed) journalism view that social media allow journalists access to numerous sources such as government institutions, activists, unaffiliated individuals, bloggers and fellow journalists who contribute material into digital spaces (Heinrich, 2012). It reflects a networked sphere in which reporters can connect with new and old sources at local, national and global levels. That journalists can find a range of information via social media is evidence that the Internet presents an environment for sharing the raw material for news is made (Knight, 2010). It confirms observations that the Internet is a mine of information that reporters can use to identify stories and sources and that social media are news sources for journalists (Mabweazara, 2014; Nassanga et al., 2013; Rodny-Gumede and Hyde-Clarke, 2014).

Respondents described social media as the easiest way to find and reach sources, which echoes Marwick and boyd's (2011) conclusion that the applications offer media cheap and easy access to sources. The interviewees emphasised how social media enable them to interact with sources in and outside Uganda. The ubiquitous nature of social media takes journalists into places where they are typically not permitted, thus giving them stories they would otherwise have missed. Journalists explained that a story about a conflict among employees at the president of Uganda's official residence was a result of social media posts by one of the people involved. The posts yielded a series of articles in *Daily Monitor* (Okuda, 2014a, 2014b) and *The Observer* (Kitatta, 2014), revealing intrigue and fighting among employees at the presidential residence. *The Observer* article (Walusimbi, 2015) in which the speaker of parliament was quoted warning a fellow politician was sourced from a video that circulated on social media. Through interviews, we learnt that the video was recorded in a closed-door meeting. The journalist interviewed the speaker basing on the contents of the video to write a story. We found that the anonymity afforded by social media allows whistle-blowers to share information that the mainstream media would otherwise not be privy to. In turn, the concerned individual or institution is prompted to substantiate the social media 'rumours', which kick-starts a reporting process.

Gender of social media sources

Content analysis showed that most social media sources (43%) were male compared to the 14.1% female as illustrated in the figure below. Some 32.0% cited both genders, while 10.9% of the social media sources could not be identified by gender (Figure 3).

While the number of male sources quoted via social media is higher compared to females, it is noteworthy that social media provide female sources a forum to openly express themselves. With the continued adoption of social media and integration into most facets of day-to-day life, more women are likely to feature in news media as

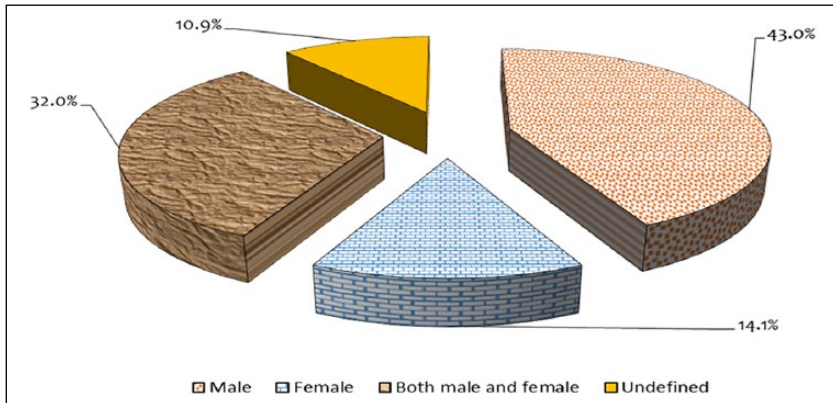


Figure 3. Gender of social media sources.

sources. Journalists pointed out that social media have the potential to increase women’s participation in public discourse and in news. Sourcing through social media could challenge traditional news sourcing practices that often favour official, male voices as it has been widely documented over time and across media (Artwick, 2014). The platforms, if deliberately used for that purpose, can increase female sources in traditional media as women find it easier to express themselves online. This is illustrated in *The Observer’s* managing editor sentiments below:

There are sections in newspapers that may benefit from gender diversification. *The Observer* used to have a section called ‘Interactive’ [. . .] that would give female voices space in the newspaper. But that goes back to a deliberate effort of a reporter to include female voices in mainstream reporting. A lot of the time, it is easier to access more male sources. (Personal communication, 15 July 2015)

That female sources are difficult to access was exemplified in the interview excerpt below by a *New Vision* editor:

In traditional media, you hardly see women as sources of information because women are most times shy [. . .] they do not want to speak to the media and there are so many gender constraints for women as sources in the media. But when it comes to social media, the ball game changes because it is an individual’s personal space. Social media provide a very good opportunity to balance views from men and women. (Personal communication, 22 June 2015)

Including more female voices would indeed revitalise Uganda’s public sphere. In 2015, women’s overall presence in the Ugandan news was only 28% of news subjects and women made news most in the topic least covered by the media, such as celebrity and arts (Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), 2015). Women are hardly heard and when quoted, it is very often on issues related to family or care taking.

That social media makes it possible for people in controlled settings to share and receive information reflects the platforms as facilitating freedoms of expression and of

access to information, which are key ingredients of democracy. But we ought to keep our optimism about the Internet's abilities in check and bear in mind existing disparities in access to digital tools in Africa. As researchers such as Banda (2010) and Moyo (2009) contend, there is an important gap between the utopian ideals expected of the Internet and what happens on the ground.

Discussion: revitalising journalism?

In interviews, journalists told that in specific situations, for example, when having limited access to a news scene, users take on the role of social sensors of news by collecting, sharing and aggregating information through social media. In what Bruno (2011: 8) calls the Twitter effect, newsrooms are provided with 'live coverage without any reporters on the ground [. . .]'. Whereas several scholars view this phenomenon as a reframing of professional journalism (Deuze, 2008; Heinrich, 2012), it can also be argued that the ability of different individuals to share information that may have been missed in mainstream media, revitalises and promotes journalism. This echoes Javuru's (2013) reflections about new media and the changing public sphere in Uganda in which he contends that Ugandans are increasingly turning to social media and other digital tools to make their voices heard on wide range of issues. The phenomenon of non-professional journalists contributing news to conventional media has been greeted with both enthusiasm and pessimism and is part of the changing ecology of journalism. For enthusiasts, benefits arising from a more open environment democratises news production in which journalists interact and collaborate with non-professionals to produce news. This expands the range of actors in the production of news (Bruns, 2014) and subsequently democratises journalism which has for long been accused of favouring privileged members of society. But for pessimists, giving ordinary people access to news production challenges established journalism tenets, not least media's gate-keeping authority (Lewis et al., 2009).

For most of the journalists interviewed, social media are the first go-to place and are, therefore, used as a starting point in the reporting process. Editors advise reporters to 'consult' Facebook when doing research for a story and looking for specific sources because, according to a respondent from *Daily Monitor*, 'it is the one place you are assured of finding the person you are looking for' (*Daily Monitor*, personal communication, 19 June 2015). Moreover, journalists' experiences showed that the Internet allows both young and old journalists working in pro-government or independent media; resource-rich or poor news organisations the same degree of access to news sources online. Online news sources, therefore, challenge the notion that resource-rich news media enjoy some advantage over poor ones in relation to news coverage as journalists from either side can access news sources without requiring a lot of resources for the reporting process.

There were also indications that people are more receptive and speak more openly on social media than they would in face-to-face conversations. Journalists reported that social media provide an opportunity to people who normally shy away from journalists to express themselves freely.

Whereas openness in an online environment raises privacy challenges especially for sources, it can partly be explained by the idea that social media afford users anonymity,

and free them from the limitations of space and time. The existence of avatars and anonymous accounts enables users to express their views more freely than they would have done in an open public setting. This is ideal in authoritarian and semi-democratic contexts where information, freedom of expression and of the press are controlled. In Uganda where public gatherings and demonstrations are regulated by the Public Order Management Act and controlled by the police, social media serve as alternative channels for opposition politicians, activists and ordinary citizens with views contrary to the government's, to communicate to journalists and their supporters. *Daily Monitor* editor quipped, 'It is like social media gives them some form of protection [. . .] that they can speak freely' (Personal communication, 19 June 2015).

However, the journalists interviewed also acknowledged that social media represent a small fraction of the population, considering that the majority of Ugandans is not connected to the Internet. One journalist specialising in the education beat explained that most of his sources are not on social media:

In my area of reporting, I have noted that a lot of people in the beat such as experts in education and lecturers do not have time for social media. So, we exchange emails and make appointments for meeting. (*The Observer*, personal communication, 6 May 2015)

More respondents expressed similar sentiments and acknowledged that some potential sources have no access to Facebook or Twitter. For example, one respondent noted,

Social media aggregate a tribe of elites in Uganda; a people who identify with each other because they deal with the same issues, probably went to the same schools, with similar interests but [. . .] a slum dweller living near a railway line that is about to be evicted, ordinarily have no access to social media. (*The Observer*, personal communication, 8 July 2015)

Overreliance on social media amplifies existing inequalities, which contradicts technologically deterministic notions that the Internet promotes democratisation through giving a voice to previously marginalised groups. Findings from the interviews with Ugandan journalists indicate that whereas social media are good sources, journalists employ them carefully, highlighting the need to sieve and gauge the kind of people who post or tweet on a topic. The findings illustrate changes in journalism and highlights the expansion of the occupation from physical to virtual space. Geographical limitations, time differences or resource limitations are not so big hindrances for journalists as they were before. Publishing tweets and posts in the newspapers is deemed as a way of involving readers in shaping the news agenda; involving them into news production by giving them a voice; pleasing readers and bribing them to buy newspapers; and engaging with them. As Broersma and Graham (2013) noted, when tweets and posts are published in newspapers, they not only get wider readership but also, they appear more credible since they are incorporated in authoritative news discourse.

This research illustrates network journalism at play in Uganda as numerous optional news sources contribute content into digital spaces, which is sometimes vital to mainstream journalism. The adoption of user-generated content in print newspapers is evidence that traditional media have opened up to the public by sharing news production processes.

In most of Africa, mediated communication among citizens is hampered by unequal access to ICTs; in addition many governments are increasingly disposed to control free speech. It is the argument of this article that we cannot fully understand the role of social media in journalistic practices without taking into account the political environment within which they operate.

The national context: the Ugandan social media tax

In addition to being one of the first countries in Africa to be connected to the Internet, Uganda was also the very first country in Africa where the number of mobile phone subscribers bypassed that of fixed-line users.⁶ To skip the development of landline infrastructure by moving directly to mobile telecommunications is a phenomenon often referred to as ‘leap frogging’ in literature on ICT, and adoption of new technologies. The concept means ‘bypassing intermediate stages of technology through which countries have historically passed during the development process’ (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 2018: 84). However, technological development alone is not sufficient to explain the current situation of social media and journalism in Uganda.

In July 2018, a social media tax of Sh200 (€0.05) per day for mobile apps, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp was introduced in Uganda. The levy is collected by the telecom companies, which deduct a daily or weekly fee when a user accesses the specified applications. As 78% of Ugandans do not have active broadband connections, accessing Internet through data on their smartphones is essential. Since the introduction of the social media tax, Internet usage in Uganda is decreasing. Within 3 months of the introduction of the tax, Internet subscription dropped by 2.5 million and social media dropped by 1.2 million (Mothobi and Chair, 2018). It is still too early to conclude the long-term effects of the social media tax in terms of (damaging) digital inclusion, but existing information show clear signs of the tax contributing to widening the inequality gap in the country. Several reports show that the social media tax seems to be increasing demographic digital divides throughout Uganda such as between rich and poor, male and female, urban and rural, citizens and refugees (Dahir, 2019; Ratcliffe and Okiror, 2019). In the capital Kampala, where salaries are higher, the tax costs 2.4% of the average monthly income, whereas in poorer areas like Bukedi and Acholi, people spend 22.6% and 19.6% of their average income, respectively, to use social media (Dahir, 2019). Furthermore, the gender divide adds to the demographic divide. There is a big gap in terms of gender when it comes to literacy rate in Uganda: whereas the male literacy rate is 79.12%, it is 61.97% for females.⁷ Furthermore, many Ugandan women, especially those who rely on subsistence farming, cannot afford smartphones and data bundles (Ratcliffe and Okiror, 2019). Cost is a significant barrier to Internet use. Therefore, adding a tax onto aspects of the Internet can only harm already fragile digital inclusion (Mothobi and Chair, 2018).

The social media tax was met with severe opposition and multiple demonstrations, prompting concerns that President Museveni was attempting to crackdown on opposition to his 33-year-rule. Museveni, however, explained the law as necessary and regarded

social media as ‘platforms for “gossip”’. Local opposition to the tax was led by Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi, a popular musician also known as Bobi Wine, who shocked Uganda’s ruling party when he won a parliamentary election in 2017 by a landslide. His success in popular culture and as a public and political actor is closely connected to his social media engagement. Kyagulanyi and fellow musician Alexander Bagonza (also known as A Pass) led protests against the social media levy in Kampala where several protesters were arrested. It was argued that the social media use tax puts an unwarranted burden on the poorest and is therefore an attack on freedom of expression. The introduction of the social media taxes was also seen as government’s acknowledgement of the powerful potential of online platforms as distribution and sources of information in Uganda. Some human rights campaigners have accused the Ugandan government of wanting to combat the general public accessing news and political information which could make them more critical of the government. Joan Nyanyuki, Amnesty International Regional Director for East Africa explains the motivation behind the social media tax thus:

The primary motivation behind [the social media tax] is to silence speech, to reduce the spaces where people can exchange information, and to really be able to control, with the recognition that online platforms have become the more commonly used way for sharing information. (In Dreyfuss, 2018)

Conclusion

The sourcing practices of journalists offer an example of how social media may have the potential to facilitate democratisation in Uganda, expanding the range of opinions in the news and make way for the diversity of voices that can better serve democracy. Journalists turn to social media to access sources who cannot be reached normally, while citizens turn to social media to express their views. At their best, social media serve as alternative platforms for news sourcing for journalists and alternative arenas through which the Uganda citizenry express themselves, thereby bypassing restrictions that characterise semi-democratic regimes such as suppression of information. Journalists and potential sources alike employ social media in the event of uncertainty to circumvent control and avoid arrests or physical attacks. Via social media, journalists access elusive sources and sources such as opposition politicians whose freedoms of expression and assembly are constantly under surveillance by security agencies. Social media may contribute to diversifying sources beyond the voices of a few dominant personalities. The presence of ordinary citizens’ voices in reportage is an indication that social media hold a promise for more participation of non-official and non-elite sources in the mainstream media. Women can more freely express their views in an online environment than they would in face-to-face meetings and contribute to discourse in conventional media. Thus, social media can challenge the status quo by broadening the scope of news coverage beyond officials and the elite and facilitate discussions in mainstream media. That new network journalism has the potential to adapt itself to changing social and technological realities echoes the reflections of media scholar Deuze (2019):

I no longer believe that the news industry as it has traditionally been organized is necessary for journalism as an ideology to survive and remain relevant to people's lives. What I do deeply care about is finding ways to prepare anyone for the perspective of a journalist (e.g., by investing in critical and creative media literacy research and training): dedicated to finding multiple perspectives, the process of rigorous verification, and the craft of telling compelling stories that matter to people's lives. (p. 3)

However, although social media both represent a great potential for more inclusive journalistic sourcing processes and have had some clear positive effects for journalism in Uganda, the appropriation of social media for sourcing also inhibits professional journalism as it poses ethical issues including questions of accuracy and privacy. Professional ideals, such as shoe-leather reporting, are also under threat as journalists sometimes choose to use social media instead of meeting sources face-to-face.


Based on the findings and discussions of this article, the worries connected to the use of social media in journalistic sources are threefold: first, social media may breed a crop of armchair journalists who generate articles without getting out of newsrooms, meaning that such reporters feed on second-hand material from the Internet with the additional challenge related to plagiarism and precision. Second, and even more important, are the concerns that the use of social media in journalistic sourcing processes may strengthen the 'filter bubbles' or 'social network filtering', and widen the gap between a connected elite and the poor without access to Internet and social media in Uganda. A third genuine case of concern, which is shared by a growing number of countries in different parts of the world, is the increasing challenge that government control and 'digital authoritarianism' poses to freedom of speech and good journalism as a foundation of democracy.

While we are not oblivious to these severe and critical limitations, the analysis of social media in the journalistic sourcing processes also allows us to see how social media may play a role in enhancing access to information, openness, accountability and freedoms of expression, and thereby facilitating journalism and encouraging democracy in Uganda today. Hence, our final take on the relationship between social media and journalism in Uganda echoes media scholar Domingo (2020) who sees the relationship between journalism and social media as one 'full of contradictions, hopes and frustrations' (p. 196) – as one both revitalising journalism and at the same time increasing the digital divide in Uganda.

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Notes

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2. <https://knowledge.geopoll.com/uganda-media-measurement-kgmm-report-0-0>
3. At the beginning of 2017, the three most read newspapers *Bukedde*, *New Vision* and *Daily Monitor* had a combined circulation of 96,960 copies daily (<https://www.theatlas.com/charts/BkRx9bDnb>)
4. <https://www.yowerikmuseveni.com/blog/museveni/president-responds-feed-back-earlier-statement-new-social-media-and-mobile-money-taxes>.
5. <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/uganda/>
6. <https://www.itu.int/net/itunews/issues/2009/06/31.aspx>
7. <https://countryeconomy.com/demography/literacy-rate/uganda>

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