

Activism as political action in Uganda: The role of social media

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Abstract

The article discusses political activism in Uganda and the role of social media. It focuses on two specific cases, the 2011 "Walk-to-Work" and the 2017 "Pads4Girls" campaigns in order to contribute to better understanding of the ever-evolving dynamic between political activism and the media in such campaigns. A disputed presidential election in 2011 in Uganda prompted opposition politicians to call nationwide protests. The architects of the protests hoped this would eventually lead to the downfall of Museveni's newly elected government. The "Pads4Girls" campaign on the other hand, was spearheaded by a female academic activist and provoked unprecedented response from politicians across the political divide, activists and unaffiliated individuals who added weight to the campaign. The article's discussions feed into a broader conversation on the interaction of media and politics in semi-democratic contexts such as Uganda, where attempts to curtail media freedom and freedom of expression are frequent.

Keywords

activism
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Introduction

Uganda: A hybrid regime meets social conflicts

This article is concerned with political activism in Uganda and the role of social media in an attempt to contribute to better understanding of the ever-evolving dynamic between political activism and the media that they employ.

Uganda fits Diamond's (2002) definition of a semi-democratic state as well as Perrot, Makara, Lafargue and Fouere's definition of a hybrid regime, where despite periodic elections, their fairness is compromised to the extent that electoral outcomes, while competitive, deviate from popular preferences (Perrot et al. 2014). Bogaards (2008) discusses how the so-called 'third wave' of democratization resulted in the proliferation of regimes that are neither fully democratic nor classic authoritarian. To capture the nature of these hybrid regimes, literature on democratization has come up with several adjectives to describe different forms of democracy and authoritarianism, the concepts of 'defective democracy' and 'electoral authoritarianism' are central among them (Bogaards 2008).

Uganda oscillates between democracy and authoritarianism with features of democratization such as some level of political competition after the lifting of a ban on political parties in 2005, holding periodic elections (Tripp 2010; Walulya 2018) and the existence of privately owned media. But the country, under President Yoweri Museveni's presidency since 1986, possesses authoritarian tendencies. This is because effective political competition is restricted, civil liberties are frequently abused, there is excessive use of force against opposition voices and those who hold divergent views, torture of political opponents, electoral fraud and gagging of the media (Mbah 2018). The National Resistance Movement (NRM) government organized the first elections in 1996. Since then, opposition politicians, political parties and parts of the civil society have protested what they deem as unfair electoral results in all the elections in 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016. The political opposition and the civil society have for long asked the government to revise the 2005 Electoral Act, arguing that the law in its current form does not allow for free and fair election. The opposition parties have, for example, called for a

reconstitution of the leadership of the Electoral Commission – a body that oversees elections – such that the leaders are independent of the appointing authority (Muhammed 2019). They blame the government for high levels of corruption, poverty, unemployment, crackdown on civil liberties, excessive use of force against opposition politicians. These factors contribute to unfairness during election campaigns. Whereas the political opposition can contest in both local and national elections in Uganda, the playing field is not levelled. Opposition politicians face arrest and are sometimes denied freedoms of assembly and expression. Civil and political liberties are limited to the extent that opposing political voices cannot organize public rallies or appear on certain radio stations (Perrot et al. 2014). While the country's constitution (1995) guarantees freedoms, infringement on freedoms of expression and of assembly are widespread as government targets opposing voices. The enactment of the Public Order Management Act in 2013 reflects government's determination to control the political arena, as the regime's security apparatus uses the law to disperse or outlaw meetings of opposition politicians and activists.

Despite the increased militarization of the Ugandan society in addition to authoritarian tendencies, political activism is on the rise. In this article, we examine two examples of political activism during the last decade of President Museveni's rule and ask: what is social media's bearing on efforts to intervene in political debates aimed at effecting political change in Uganda – a semi-democratic country? An important part of the discussions is whether and to which degree digital media have transformed the scene of political protests in Uganda.

Social media and activism

Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007) argue that decisive features of a political regime pertain to how social conflict is organized and managed through modes of political participation. Modes of participation encompass institutional structures and ideologies that shape the inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups in the political process (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007). When the capacity of the political opposition to organize and participate in

debate is limited, political action may take alternative and new forms. Political activism entails actions taken to advance a political goal. It could take the form of campaigning and participating in demonstrations. Literature on politics and protests theorizes that political grievances are the root cause of dissent in non-democratic countries (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). Of relevance here is the notion that hybrid states cannot change government policies to the demands of the people quickly enough, which increases the need for alternative methods.

Current understandings of collective political action increasingly tend to focus on the role of social media (Margetts et al. 2015) with evidence that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter facilitate activism. Social media have emerged as avenues for debate and discussion and as arenas for engaging in civic-related activities. These platforms may serve as platforms for users to express their political views or getting involved with issues they feel are of importance. Research from all over the world shows that social media are avenues for political debate and alternative places where civilians converge. Renowned movements such as the #MeToo movement and Black Lives Matter came to the world's attention because of social media (Anderson et al. 2018). Some researchers question the role of new media technologies and social media in bringing about change (see, e.g. Morozov 2011; Brown et al. 2012;¹ Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). Even in Africa where research about new media and activism is just starting to emerge (see Mutsvairo 2016), the roles of ICTs in recent social and political movements on the continent is debated. Some see media-coined phrases such as 'Twitter revolution' and 'Facebook revolution' as assumptions of technological determinism and warn against their failure to recognize complex interactions between society and technology (see, e.g. Olorunnisola and Martin 2012; Duncan 2013). Even before social media became popular, researchers (e.g. Tumusiime 2007) had regarded the impact of new media technologies with scepticism and emphasized the need to consider contexts within which the technologies are employed. Except for Tunisia, indeed, most of the movements in the Arab world, the so-called Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011, were unsuccessful, and often brought about changes that were more oppressive than before. In the four most violent

uprisings in Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen, all four countries slid backwards on the Failed States Index the following year (Ibish 2012). Although the outcome of the movements was mainly negative, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter did play a central role in mobilizing for collective action and in shaping political debate during the time span of the movements (see, e.g. O'Donnell 2011; Howard et al. 2011). An important experience drawn from the Arab movements is that one cannot fully understand the role of social media in collective action without first taking into account the political environment in which they operate (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013).

Early literature on new technologies in Africa describes the internet as an alternative platform of expression in the face of repression and examines how new media foster democracy (Moyo 2009; Kupe 2004; Mudhai 2004). For example, Moyo (2009) focused on citizen journalism, paying specific attention to citizens' uses of SMS and weblogs to exchange information during the controversial delay in the releasing of the 2008 election results in Zimbabwe. He argued that citizen journalism contributed a great deal to the circulation of public opinion, and to some extent influenced the way mainstream media covered the post-election period. Other researchers describe the internet as liberation media (e.g. Diamond 2010) because they enable users to create, publish and distribute information without necessarily going through gatekeepers. Arguing in the context of the Ugandan diaspora, Javuru (2012) noted that online platforms are a promise of the internet as a non-hierarchical network that permits access to information and fosters participatory democracy. Elsewhere, Javuru (2013: 371) observed that many Ugandans use new media including social media as the most convenient and efficient way to make their voices heard on a variety of issues.

Little is known about social media and activism in the context of Uganda. Monica Chibita (2016) found an emerging form of digital activism but concluded that digital activism is plagued by logistical and structural barriers.

Activism in present-day Uganda

Political activism has become a defining characteristic of present-day Uganda. The past one and half decades of Yoweri Museveni's rule have been marred with protests. Opposition politicians, the civil society and students alike stage protests against policies and decisions of the NRM government. The first signs of political discontent and disillusionment in the past fifteen years can be traced in 2005, when government amended the constitution to allow Museveni to contest for a third term (Biryabarema 2017). The constitution previously provided that a president would only serve a maximum of two terms. In 2006, Uganda witnessed a major protest that came to widely be known as the anti-Mabira giveaway crusade. This protest was in opposition to Museveni's proposal to giveaway part of Mabira – one of the largest rain forests in Uganda – to an investor for sugarcane growing. More information about the anti-Mabira protest is provided later in the article. The country experienced more political protests in 2009 after a fall out between the government and the Buganda kingdom. The 2009 protests broke out after state security agencies blocked the king of Buganda and the kingdom officials from visiting Bugerere, a county that had been at the centre of contention between the kingdom and government. Different forms of protests followed in 2011, 2014, 2016 and 2018.

Political activism in Uganda now comprises protest movements, popular struggles and creative campaigns geared towards influencing government policies and effecting political change. Larok (2017) observes that present-day activism is an authentic expression of grievances and injustices rooted in the Ugandan society. He notes that activism is increasingly becoming more creative and original as unaffiliated individuals, activists and individual opposition politicians manoeuvre an increasingly militarized country to express themselves on specific causes such as corruption, abuse of power, exploitation, poor economic conditions, election malpractices and misuse of state funds. Some of the popular examples of activism include *Black Monday*, a campaign against corruption. Initiated in 2012, the *Black Monday* campaign called on workers to dress in black every Monday in protest against corruption in government (The Independent 2019). Another example of activism took the form of naked protest, a form of demonstration in

which protesters strip to express their discontent towards government authority. This form of protest has become common in Uganda, especially among women (see Abonga et al. 2019; Ebila and Tripp 2016). Several naked demonstrations have been staged in Uganda since 2012 in protest against land-related issues (Lawino 2012; Onyango and Emwamu 2015; Kirinya 2018). One such protest occurred in 2016 when women in Apaa, a village northern Uganda, staged a nude protest to prevent government from evicting them from their land (Ocungi and Okello 2015). A similar protest occurred in Amuru district in northern Uganda in 2017 (see Anon 2017).

A youth-led movement called the *Jobless Brotherhood* caught public attention in 2014 when they smuggled two live pigs into parliament (Choksi 2015). The pigs, painted in yellow – the colour of the ruling government (NRM), symbolized greed of Uganda's politicians. It was aimed at highlighting the problem of unemployment among the youth. The rate of unemployment among the youth between 18 and 30 years, according to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), stood at 13.3 per cent in 2018 (UBOS 2019). The "Jobless Brotherhood" carried out more such protests targeting politicians in government and opposition to express discontent with the general political system (URN 2016).

Stella Nyanzi, the then research fellow at Makerere University, championed a social media campaign that called for giving free sanitary pads to all girls in Uganda. The campaign, which transformed Nyanzi into a symbol of activism via social media, emerged from a political promise made by Museveni during the 2016 presidential election campaigns. Prior to the "Pads4Girls" campaign, Nyanzi used erotic innuendo to describe Uganda's political situation in her Facebook posts. We write more about this campaign later in the article. These are some of the examples that show how political activism in Uganda has evolved.

Methods

There are several ways of measuring political engagement on social media. We focus on two specific cases, the "Walk-to-Work" and the "Pads4Girls" campaigns as case studies. A case study is an in-depth investigation of a specific situation and is used to narrow

down a broad field of research into a more easily researchable topic (Yin 2009). The two campaigns are somewhat different in nature. Whereas the architects of the "Walk-to-Work" protests had a clearly political objective and hoped the campaign would lead to the downfall of the new government, the "Pads4Girls" campaign was more socially oriented, but also had a clear political slant against the Museveni regime.

Content analysis (Krippendorff 2012) and interviewing (Hennink et al. 2011) provide robust findings and strengthen this research's contribution to knowledge about social media's role in activism campaigns. We analysed Facebook and Twitter posts about the "Walk-to-Work" protests in April 2011 and the "Pads4Girls" campaign in 2017 to obtain knowledge on how the campaigns evolved and to what degree and how social media were used in the process. The selection criterion for the posts that were analysed was that the post was directly related to the "Walk-to-Work" and "Pads4Girls" campaigns, respectively. For the "Walk-to-Work" campaign, we used the following search words to obtain data from both Facebook and Twitter: Walk to work, walk to work 2011, #WalktoWork. For the "Pads4Girls" campaign, we only used posts and tweets posted between January and April 2017, using the following search words: Pads for girls Uganda, pads4girls, @Pads4GirlsUg, @StellNyanzi and #PadsforGirlsUg.

One of the lead strategists of the "Pads4Girls" campaign provided deeper insights into how Facebook was deployed for civic and political expression and the connection between online and offline activism (see Namasinga and Orgeret 2020).

A closer look at two campaigns

While Museveni has a strong grip over state institutions, there has been growing dissent in the country the last decade, especially among the youth who comprise more than half of Uganda's population. As in most countries, social media have changed the face of public communication in Uganda. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn are the top ten websites in Uganda. At the time of writing (July 2020), Facebook and Twitter were the most used applications at 2,471,000² and an estimated 128,000,³ respectively (Internet World Stats⁴). Government and civil society employ social media for information sharing,

communication with the citizenry and for propaganda. The platforms facilitate discussions among the citizenry, between the electorate and the leaders. They offer opportunities to government agents and political opposition to deliberate and to mobilize the electorate. The internet applications are alternative channels for opposition politicians and civil society groups with limited access to mainstream media outlets that are controlled by government sympathizers.

The first countrywide political demonstrations where new media technologies were used to mobilize in Uganda were in 2005, against the arrest of Museveni's political challenger Kizza Besigye. Besigye was arrested and charged with treason and rape shortly before the official presidential nominations (Kalyango 2010). Another campaign, "Save Mabira", in 2007 comprised online and offline activities against the government's plans to degazette Uganda's largest tropical rain forest (Chibita 2016). Most of these protests had a profound effect on the country. For example, the September 2009 protests left about 40 dead, four radio stations closed and a photojournalist assaulted and arrested for taking pictures of soldiers (Anon 2010; Kavuma 2009).

In the following, we look into how activism through social media may play into political activism and discuss how social media relate to other forms of communication and social mobilization. We look closely at two other decisive protests during the last decade: The "Walk-to-Work" protests in April 2011 and the "Pads4Girls" campaign in 2017 to discuss the degree to which digital activism can be seen as part of political protests in Uganda, as well as the political relevance of social and mainstream media in semi-democratic contexts.

The 2011 "Walk-to-Work" campaign

Reports of election irregularities, vote buying and persecution of opponents coupled with rising food and fuel prices, poor service delivery and the belief that the election had been rigged was the background when the Ugandan political opposition called for civil action in what came to be known as the "Walk-to-Work" protest in April 2011. As the name suggests, the "Walk-to-Work" protests called on Ugandans to walk instead of using public

transport, driving or using other means of transport to work every Monday and Thursday. The brain behind the protests was an activist group dubbed Action for Change (A4C) spearheaded by the opposition politician Kizza Besigye who had just lost the presidential vote to incumbent Yoweri Museveni. The hope was that the whole country would join hands and rise up against the skyrocketing cost of living. The architects of the protests hoped this would eventually lead to the downfall of the newly elected government of Museveni. The protests brought together members of parliament, the civil society, religious leaders in addition to individuals of all walks of life. On 11 April, the first day of 'walking to work', opposition politicians Kizza Besigye, Norbert Mao and several other protestors were arrested. The peaceful demonstrators around the country were met with live bullets and roadblocks. Hundreds of protestors were beaten, arrested and some (numbers vary from five to nine people) lost their lives in the process.

Conventional media were still the major scene, and after Ugandan television stations broadcast brutal images of the police forces' violence when arresting opposition politicians and firing teargas into homes, schools and hospitals, live coverage of the protests was banned. Security forces prevented journalists to approach opposition figures who had been arrested. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that at least eight journalists were injured during the demonstrations (Echwalu 2011). The crackdown on conventional media gives a clear indication of how they were perceived as a threat. During the "Walk-to-Work" campaign, various government sources accused independent media in general, and the newspaper *The Independent* in particular, of having an anti-government agenda and supporting the demonstrators⁵ (Rupiny 2011).

Several social media savvy activists took to Facebook and Twitter to express their discontent. Looking into the Facebook and Twitter posts about the protests in April 2011 when the campaign was at its peak, we find that the most prominent Facebook posts about the "Walk-to-Work" protests were about Uganda Communication Commission's attempt to block Facebook and Twitter. In one such post (The African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME) 2011), ACME posted a letter regarding the request to service providers to block the said social media applications. The post states in part 'Uganda

Communications Commission sought to have Facebook and Twitter blocked last week following Walk-to-Work protests by opposition' (ACME 2011)⁶. Others are images of opposition politicians allegedly walking to work or facing off with security forces. Most of the Facebook posts are made by media organizations such as NTV Uganda and individual journalists. One Facebook post by NTV-Uganda (NTV Uganda 2011) is a picture in which opposition politician Kizza Besigye appears to be 'walking to work'.

A Facebook page, *Activists for Change*, shared news stories, opinions and commentary about the "Walk-to-Work" protests from other media outlets in and out of Uganda. The people who shared content about "Walk-to-Work" on this page uploaded full news stories including headline, byline and all content on the timeline of the page. Such posts were made between 12 and 29 April 2011. For example, one of the posts is a story in which Uganda Broadcasting Council warns against how the media reported the protests (Activists4change 2011)⁷.

There was more activity about the "Walk-to-Work" campaign by individuals on Twitter than on Facebook. The hashtag #walk to work trended in the Uganda twitter-sphere in the month of April. Other hashtags that relate to the campaign included #walk-to-work, #teargas, #gunshots, #Besigye. The tweets were updates about the protests while some were calls for democracy to prevail. Some of the tweets directly call on government to address the high cost of fuel and other pressing issues in the country. For example, one tweeter tweets (Ruhweeza 2011): 'the ugandan govt must appear to do something abt rising costs of food&fuel. use of force will only hurt them. #walk to work uganda walks'.

The issue of government's attempt to block social media during the protests also features in some of the tweets. For example, one tweet (Ssali 2011) reads, 'I hear in #Uganda, #UTL is starting to block #facebook, #twitter in fear for tomorrow's #walk to work #demonstrations!! any clue plz help!!' Other tweets are reports of violence, arrests and detention of protestors as security forces quashed the protests throughout the country.

The "Walk-to-Work" campaign eventually faded as security forces made it impossible for anyone to walk in the streets on the days of the protests.

Although the "Walk-to-Work" campaign did not result in directly changing Ugandan politics, it was successful in terms of drawing people into the streets for public demonstrations and showing both the regime and the participants that power may be changeable. The campaign captured attention, intensified solidarity among participants and prepared the path for other citizen interventions. The conventional media, and again *The Observer* in particular, continued to keep the torch lit, by reminding the readers that the victims of the campaign have not succeeded in seeking justice and compensation, hence holding security forces accountable and continuing a critical role against the government (Ssekika 2016).

The 2017 "Pads4Girls" campaign

The "Pads4Girls" campaign⁸ was born in early 2017 following the Ugandan government's failure to honour a presidential election campaign promise. The campaign was championed by Stella Nyanzi, an academic and research fellow at Makerere University through Facebook to provide free sanitary towels to girls. The organizers established a voluntary working group to coordinate the campaign. The group, which was made up of 40 volunteers, appealed to social media users to contribute to the cause (Nyanzi 2017)⁹. The campaign collected over 10 million pads and reached out to about 2000 girls.¹⁰

Nyanzi described the campaign as a citizen intervention to fill the gap and ensure that girls do not miss school due to lack of safe menstrual materials (Nyanzi 2017). These were distributed in schools in rural Uganda. This campaign attracted the attention of politicians, journalists in the mainstream media in and out of Uganda plus education activists. While menstrual hygiene is a social issue, the "Pads4Girls" campaign emerged as a political issue. President Museveni had in 2015 during election campaigns promised free sanitary pads to all school-going female children but reneged on his promise after the election. Stella Nyanzi employed text, pictures and videos to talk about the campaign and about menstrual hygiene in addition to problems such as infringement on civil liberties such as freedom of expression. The academic-turned activist used social media to address politicians who make promises for election purposes and do not deliver after

getting into office. The campaign (through Facebook) tackled issues such as poverty, bribery, corruption and misappropriation of funds as well as vote rigging in elections. For example, a Facebook post (Nyanzi 2017) addressed the minister of education, who is married to President Museveni and hence also Uganda's First Lady, and criticises her for being an accomplice of the government that neglects the poor.

A Twitter account @Pads4GirlsUg¹¹ was opened in March 2017, for the same campaign. At the time of writing, the campaign on the page had 254 tweets and 182 followers. The campaign hashtag #Pads4GirlsUg trended during the campaign period and just like on Facebook, tweets mobilized for sanitary pads and provided updates about the resources that had been collected and distributed. For example, one tweet (Pads4GirlsUg 2017)¹² with the hashtag #Pads4GirlsUg contains pictures of some of the beneficiaries of the campaign and states in part 'we must keep our girls in school. Menstruation must be normalised'. This tweet champions girl child education. The message of the tweet implies that addressing menstrual hygiene is one way reducing school out. Other tweets and retweets from individuals and the @Pads4GirlsUg twitter handle give an account of the campaign, displaying the distribution of sanitary pads in pictures. Others regard the "Pads4Girls" campaign as a cause for addressing women's rights for development in Uganda. Another tweet under the @Pads4GirlsUg twitter handle and the #Pads4GirlsUg hashtag shows that women's issues are neglected in Uganda by stating thus, 'each women's health in Uganda Is budgeted for shs45 in the national budget less than the lowest currency in UG (50shs)' (Munabi 2017)¹³. Another tweet supports this observation and notes in response, 'unless women are prioritised #Uganda wont achieve sustainable development' (Munabi 2017)¹⁴ The social media posts resulted in an offline campaign in which funds were collected and sanitary pads were mobilized and distributed to schools. As one of the central participants in the campaign explained in an interview:

The campaign was more than successful [...] The working group was started at the police station [...] An then it evolved so quickly. In three days, we had hit our target of 1 million pads [...] In three days we had a million pads. In two weeks, we had 7 million pads [...]. We showed that if the government cannot deliver, we will deliver.

(Nyanzi 2018)

The government responded to the campaign and the Facebook posts by charging Stella Nyanzi with offensive communication and cyber harassment, to prevent her from using social media. She was blocked from travelling, and there were reports that mainstream media had been ordered not to report about her or the campaign. The government ordered schools not to invite the "Pads4Girls" campaigners, subjected her to interrogations and got her suspended from her job. The distribution of sanitary pads stopped just before Stella Nyanzi's arrest in May 2018. She was again imprisoned and sentenced to eighteen months in July 2019, over cyber harassment and a poem posted on her Facebook page in which she was insulting the president. She was released in February 2020.

The minister of education and First Lady Janet Museveni, who rarely talks to the media, responded through a televised interview: 'I have received reports about Dr Stella Nyanzi insulting me. I don't know what wrong I committed to deserve that kind of language and abuse. However, I want to tell Ugandans that I forgive her'. What started as one woman's Facebook posts turned into something big, attracting the attention of policy-makers, politicians and activists and making headlines in the conventional media.

Additionally, the #FreeStellaNyanzi hashtag became a prominent twitter campaign to advocate for the release of Nyanzi. The #FreeStellaNyanzi campaign raised USD 5000 to help with Nyanzi's legal fees. Moreover, the crowdfunding campaign under the hashtag #PadsforUganda had raised about USD 5852 to buy and distribute sanitary pads to schoolgirls by October 2017.

The "Pads4Girls" campaign was much more prominent on Facebook than Twitter. This is probably because Stella Nyanzi, describes herself on Facebook as a 'diehard Facebooker' and thus used Facebook more than Twitter during the campaign.

The "Pads4Girls" campaign attracted the mainstream media, which supported the campaign by giving sanitary pads and cash, and by inviting the "Pads4Girls" leaders onto talk shows on radio and TV. The campaign, therefore, gained coverage in local newspapers, radio and television and in international media (Namasinga and Orgeret 2020). Three of the analysed posts in particular talk about the role of journalists and mainstream media in the campaign. One post (Nyanzi 2017) stresses the importance of

what the writer calls ‘public media’, meaning conventional media. The message regards mainstream media as ‘important allies in the citizen-led intervention to take sanitary #Pads4GirlsUg to poor girls who miss school during their menstruation due to lack of menstrual hygiene materials’.

Social media’s effect on traditional media’s news reporting can be seen through news editors, and in some cases the governments that they observe, no longer being the gatekeepers of information. The cost of distribution has almost completely disappeared, resulting in radically different power relations. As one contributor noted: ‘[i]t was absolutely fantastic in the sense that social media draw mainstream media. It was kind of the reverse of what would ordinarily be happening in Uganda’ (Nyanzi 2018). Traditional offline media driving online media is often talked about. Interestingly in the "Pads4Girls campaign, the relationship was reversed.

Has social media transformed activism in Uganda?

Social media are becoming important for political activism in an increasingly controlled political environment. They have become conduits of information for Ugandans with access to the internet. They are being used for mobilization towards political causes, creation of awareness about political issues, political education and political communication. Activism can take place online and offline, through conventional and social media and often the different forms of action and types of media are interrelated. Oftentimes, organizers use the internet to call for offline action. Digital media have changed the ways in which citizens engage in politics. Smartphones have changed the way political events, protests and movements are organized, helping to mobilize new supporters to a range of causes. With such activity becoming an everyday occurrence, new forms of digital activism are now emerging.

In the "Walk-to-Work" campaign, activists used social media to a large degree, as the traditional media were partly curtailed by the authorities. This was one of the first campaigns in Uganda where social media played a role, and their perceived influence was

demonstrated when government asked internet service providers to shut down social media services during the protests (Kavuma 2012).

In 2017, the amount of Ugandan internet users had increased significantly. Still the relationship between online and offline campaign was what made the "Pads4Girls" campaign powerful. The professionally handled online campaign eventually forced the person in charge – the first lady/minister of education – to respond. That the campaign succeeded in intervening in political debates in this matter, is quite extraordinary as the power holders in general and the first lady/minister of education in particular very seldom replies to questions from the press. The campaign is also an example of how social media are becoming a political platform in its own right in Uganda (see also Ogola 2018a, 2018b).

The introduction of the social media tax may be seen as an attempt to control a sphere, which increasingly gains power in terms of mobilizing and organizing political protests. In 2018, President Museveni initiated an upfront 200 shillings (\$0.05 or £0.04) social media tax in July 2018, for using applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, among others. Museveni expressed that he regards social media as a luxury commodity that should be paid for before use. In addition to taxing voice and messaging internet services, government also introduced a levy on mobile phone money transactions. While the government regarded the new tax as a measure to finance infrastructure development, sections of the Ugandan population perceived the tax as a means to suppress freedom of expression and a burden to millions of Ugandans who earn a living from mobile phone money business. The tax can also be interpreted as yet another sign of the increasing power and political relevance of social media in Uganda.

Government's efforts to control social media are a clear indication of the growing importance of online spaces. The tax is largely regarded as government's attempt to control access to social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. In the three months following the introduction of the levy, the number of internet subscriptions to such services fell by more than 2.5 million (Ratcliffe and Okiror 2019).

In June 2019, it was clear that the tax had a tangible effect on Ugandans' access to internet as 7.8 per cent of the population reported that they no longer used their mobile phones to access the internet since the introduction of the tax and half of the users had reduced their use of social media. The cost of internet is still a prohibitive factor in access for users as only 20 per cent of Ugandans have WiFi connection at home (Ratcliffe and Okiror 2019). Some Ugandans resorted to downloading VPN software to avoid paying the social media use tax. Thus, it seems obvious that the social media taxes increase the digital divide. The tax led to online and offline criticism, resulting in street protests in Kampala and several other towns in the country, led by Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi (also known as Bobi Wine), a member of parliament and popular musician. Wine's arrest in August 2018, for opposing the social media levy, resulted in widespread protests in and out of Uganda. Over 30 journalists from different media houses faced suspension from their jobs for covering of Wine's arrest and exposing the conduct of security agencies (Steffen 2019), showing that the struggle for access to the public sphere is still very much present.

Summing up

The "Walk-to-Work" and the "Pads4Girls" campaigns both intervened in political debates, although they did not affect any direct political changes. The findings further indicate that the deployment of social media varied significantly in the two campaigns: Social media deployment during the "Walk-to-Work" campaign was not as was the case in the "Pads4Girls" campaign. An important reason here is that social media were not as widespread in Uganda in 2011 as it was in 2017. Internet access and use has grown from about 3.2 million users in 2011 to 19 million as of 2018.¹⁵ It is, therefore, obvious that activism via social media was more widespread in the 2017 campaigns than in 2011. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the potential of social media during the "Walk-to-Work" campaigns by pointing out that the government of Uganda attempted to block access to social media in April 2011, in fear that the protests would escalate into constituting a threat.

Whereas the "Walk-to-Work" campaign used social media in mobilizing and drawing people into the streets for public demonstrations, the "Pads4Girls" campaign was initially mainly a social media drive that inspired offline action. The "Pads4Girls" campaign evolved from Facebook and spread to Twitter and into the real world. Unlike the "Walk-to-Work" protests, the "Pads4Girls" campaign was spearheaded by a female activist – who is an academic and not a political figure per se. That a female non-political figure could spearhead a campaign of that calibre is evidence of how social media are bringing about a shift in gender and politics. Moreover, the "Pads4Girls" crusade provoked unprecedented response from politicians across the political divide, activists and unaffiliated individuals who added weight to the campaign. The campaign raised over USD 5000, collected and distributed sanitary pads in several rural-based schools. Government's response to Stella Nyanzi's social media communication and her subsequent prosecution and imprisonment may be read as a proof of the potential of social media for activism. While the government did not come out to provide free sanitary pads, the campaign succeeded in highlighting both political and social issues that bedevil Uganda and in raising awareness about an issue that for a large part has been ignored in the Ugandan public sphere.

The government through the Ugandan Communications Commission has on several occasions banned coverage of protests and activities of opposition politicians in addition to targeting journalists who cover such news events. Simultaneously, crackdown on social media is becoming common in semi-democratic contexts. Besides Uganda, other countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia have resorted to suppress social media use. The introduction of the social media tax in Uganda is a move to control access to the internet applications, and there are already reports that the measure has led to a drop in internet use in the country (Ratcliffe and Okiror 2019). Several Ugandans including some of the activists behind the campaigns under study have been arrested for their communication on social media. Despite this downside, we surmise that social media are difficult to control because the internet is neither bound by time, space or location as conventional print or broadcast media. While

internet shutdown is possible, users can, to a certain degree, bypass internet control using sophisticated software unlike radio or TV stations that are easily switched off. Moreover, crackdown on social media within the Uganda territory would not prevent Ugandans based outside the country to use the platforms to agitate for political change.

The discussion here shows that although Uganda is a hybrid political system at the crossroads between democracy and authoritarianism, the country also has its own internal dynamics and some distinct forms of participation that come to the surface through the examples of activism. Internet applications hold a promise for expression as authoritarian governments tighten their grip on conventional conduits of information. Therefore, our examples resonate well with George Ogola's work, which notes that there are pockets of dissent emerging from digital platforms whose practical political consequences are being slowly realized (2018a, 2018b). Deliberations about social media's role in political activism in non-democratic developing contexts remain open for discussion. We are not oblivious to measures that limit internet use and how this affects access for the majority users. Moreover, we are not blind to disparities that exist in access to digital tools in most developing contexts. Nevertheless, this article posits that social media hold a promise for political activism and political transformation in Uganda and beyond as they enable information sharing and mobilization for action, especially by and for individuals and groups whose access to conventional media are limited. And finally, political activism may increase civilian consciousness of the changeable nature of power. This is significant, not least in a country like Uganda, where the majority of the population has never known another head of state than the present one.

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