Chapter 37

Social Media Bots, Trolls, and the Democratic Mandates in Sub–Saharan Africa:
Exploring the Ambivalence of Social Media and Political Homophily in Zambian Online Networks

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigates the role that bots and trolls played on social media in widening the gaps of political partisanship in sub-Saharan Africa. Taking the case of the 2018 Zambian by-elections, the authors examined the relationship between online social media content that propagates hate and organized trolling efforts in Zambia. The study used machine learning tools to identify the origin of the bots on Facebook and Twitter accounts (trolls) of the two major political parties in Zambia (PF and UPND). Online posts that accounted for the election campaigns and the aftermath in the year 2018 were considered for the study. Findings suggest that social-mediated conversations were divided along political lines and that the examined trolling accounts systematically took advantage of the existing echo chambers to create hate messages on Zambian social networks. In other words, the findings indicated that the online hate messages that accounted for violence were neither created by the PF or UPND political parties as earlier studies suggest but by bots and trolls.

INTRODUCTION

Although Zambia, like any other African country has been characterized by partisan politics and inclined to voting along tribal lines (Eifert, Miguel, and Posner, 2010; Gondwe, 2018), violence has never been its defining feature. Since independence, and after the 1991 tripartite elections, when Zambia embraced multi-party democratic elections, and declared itself a Christian nation, the transitions from one leader to the other has been termed as peaceful (Bratton, Dulani, and Nkomo, 2017; Goldring and Wahman, 2016). However, recent trends have shown that there is a wind of 'violence' that continue to creep into the Zambian elections (Bratton, Dulani, and Nkomo, 2017). This wind of violence is mostly attributed to social media networks run by political parties in an effort to promote participatory democracy. Unfortunately, most of these conversations have morphed into an enigma, inspiring fear and admiration among the general population of Zambia.

What is problematic is that most conversations tend to instigate insults and threats of violence among partisan lines. The question as to what is leading to this has become prevalent. Are political parties and their leaders really instigating violence through their online posts? Are these problems a result of the country getting industrialize and digitalization (Mabweazara, 2015; Mabweazara 2014), or just a mere fact that the world as a whole is experiencing a paradigm shift in the political arena as Fukuyama, (2006) had earlier ascertained. Rather, are these problems a result of an attempt to amalgamate the Western understanding of democracy and social media in an environment where we are only consumers? Many scholars have attributed the challenges faced by African governments to the quest for a democratic mandate enforced by Western ideologies (Gavshon, 2019; Adar, 2018; Camaroff & Camaroff, 2015).

How to define democracy under the constructs of social media, and the inevitable quest for participatory democracy. Generally, democracy is perceived in terms of Abraham Lincoln's simple conventional annotation of "government of the people, by the people for people". While this definition might seem straightforward, the application is not as easy as it seems as this has led to myopic definitions that perceive democracy as simply a '10-year maximum term of office' (Chabal, 2017). Others have stretched it to include 'freedom' of expression, which to many implies character assassination of political individuals and those that seek to oppose the powerful (Bashir et. al., 2018; Shaw & Thomas, 2017; Fews, 2017, Masanja, 2012; Mfumbusa, 2008).

Second, there has been an inevitable democratic mandate for citizens to participate through social media. To a large extent, the role that social media plays in politics and democracy could be attributed to the Arab Springs (Hamdy& Gomaa 2012) that witnessed the rise of 'weak audiences' in challenging powerful leaders and governments. Since then, a number of studies have substantiated that social media platforms have the capacity to advance the mandates for a democracy in a country (Tomin et al., 2020; Gondwe, 2020). This is because individual have easy access to information and can easily meddle into the government media agenda. Because of this, political party leaders have equally taken advantage of the social media platforms in their campaign as they seek to reach a mass audience at a cheaper cost. Although this by itself is a good idea, challenges as to whether both the audience and their leaders can maintain civility online becomes a social problem. The problem is more prevalent during elections as observed in recent countries such as Tanzania that chose to shut down the internet during their 2020 presidential elections, and in the 2020 US presidential elections where social media owners are choosing to restrict social media content.

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