Co-creation HUB Ltd
RC 918335

AIRA
African Internet Rights Alliance

The Unseen Electorate

How Social Media Algorithms Affect Voting in Africa

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Tech and Society
by CcHUB

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Executive Summary

Social media algorithms have become a form of electoral infrastructure in Africa, shaping political visibility, credibility, and voter decision-making in ways that existing electoral laws, election observation missions, and regulatory frameworks do not capture. In 2022, Africa had 384 million social media users, accounting for 67.8% of the continent's internet users. Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube now rival or even surpass radio and television as channels for political communication and mobilisation.

Unlike traditional media, however, political exposure on digital platforms is governed not by public-interest mandates but by opaque, engagement-optimised algorithmic systems, largely designed and controlled outside African political, legislative, linguistic, and electoral contexts. This paper introduces the concept of the “unseen electorate", referring to the role of social media algorithms in shaping political perceptions and influencing voter behaviour and voting patterns. Consequently, social media algorithmic curation, amplification, and suppression of content, rather than direct campaign messaging or institutional media, could already potentially be determining electoral outcomes in Africa without the knowledge of the real voters.

Drawing on evidence across African countries, including Algeria, Angola, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Tunisia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, and complemented by an original social media listening experiment in Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, and Uganda, the study demonstrates how algorithms systematically privilege certain narratives, sentiments, and actors and marginalise substantive civic engagements, thus enabling new forms of electoral disenfranchisement.

The study’s core contributions include:

- Grounding social media algorithmic influence empirically within African electoral contexts rather than extrapolating from Western democracies or other foreign jurisdictions;
- Demonstrating how algorithmic effects interact with Africa-specific conditions such as uneven connectivity, youth-dominated electorates, linguistic diversity, and the dominance of private messaging platforms, and
- Identifying actionable accountability and policy pathways for electoral management bodies (EMBs), regulators, platforms, and regional institutions.

Key Findings

1. Social media is now a primary gateway to political information for large segments of the African electorate

In 2023, 33% of Africans reported consuming news on social media daily, closing in on consumption on traditional sources, 39% for television and 41% for radio, continuing a steady upward trend since 2021. Access is highly uneven: digital news consumption exceeded 70% in countries such as Mauritius, Gabon, Morocco, and South Africa, while remaining below 20% in Ethiopia, Madagascar, and Uganda. Algorithmic influence is therefore concentrated, not universal, disproportionately shaping political exposure in urban, youth-heavy, and better-connected contexts.

2. Algorithmic exposure amplifies existing socio-economic inequalities in political information
Young people aged 18 to 35 account for 53% of social media news consumers, compared to 24% among those aged 55 and older. Young people constitute the bulk of first-time voters and hence are largely politically inexperienced. Urban residents are nearly twice as likely as rural residents to access political news via social media (63% vs. 36%). Access rises sharply with education, from 24% among those with primary education to 83% among those with post-secondary education, indicating that algorithmic systems reinforce rather than mitigate informational inequality.

3. Social media listening data confirms that political exposure is algorithmically injected, not user-driven
Analysis of 75 days of "For You"[1] feeds on X shows that even non-political baseline accounts are routinely exposed to substantial political content. In Namibia and Kenya, non-political X accounts registered political content densities of 0.476 and 0.461, just slightly below the 0.557 and 0.466 observed in political accounts, demonstrating that political signalling is significantly embedded in feeds regardless of declared user interests or preferences.

Across Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and Namibia, political posts achieved between 2.5 and 3.6 times the effective visibility of non-political ones, with Namibia having the sharpest distortion: political posts reached 4.03% visibility efficiency, compared to 1.6% for non-political content; about 2.5 times more visibility despite far lower overall volume. Social media algorithms thus function as systemic political amplifiers, crowding out general-interest, objective political discourse and civic information.

4. Negative sentiment is the primary driver of algorithmic reach
Political content with high negative sentimental intensity outperforms neutral or positive material. In Kenya, negative political posts generated an average of 70000 impressions, surpassing the 56000 for all non-political content, despite political content accounting for only half of non-political content. In Namibia, negative political discourse generated 213000 impressions, the steepest share in the study countries. Across all four countries, the presence of political content in user feeds tripled as sentiment shifted from positive to negative, confirming that algorithms reward polarisation, alarm, and emotional friction.

5. Substantive civic content is systematically penalised
Regression modelling shows that higher informational depth ("Topic Score") is associated with significant reductions in reach: a 46.8% decline in Kenya, 53.6% in Namibia, 55.4% in Nigeria, and a 66.8% in Uganda, the most significant across study countries. Engagement volume, rather than informational quality, is the dominant predictor of visibility. This creates a structural "virality trap" that incentivises controversy while suppressing constructive civic discourse.

6. Digital visibility is extremely concentrated
Gini coefficients for political exposure average 0.78 across all four countries, indicating severe inequality in attention distribution. This means that in practical terms, a tiny fraction of X accounts captures the overwhelming majority of impressions, producing a winner-takes-all attention political economy that sidelines local, community-based, and non-elite political voices.

[1] "For You" tab is the exclusive a user's tab on X and Tik Tok account where content is largely directed by algorithms and consumed

Why This Matters for African Elections

African electoral systems are structurally exposed to algorithmic risk. Social media now operates as an electoral infrastructure without commensurate oversight or accountability safeguards by social media platforms, with platform moderation investment remaining disproportionately concentrated outside Africa. As a result, digital platforms central to political mobilisation remain largely invisible to election monitoring.

Disproportionate responses by some African states, such as internet shutdowns and broad misinformation laws that restrict legitimate political expression, do not necessarily address the social media algorithmic drivers of harm. Engagement-optimised systems further disadvantage candidates and civic actors with limited resources for sustained digital amplification, as well as female candidates whose candidacy can be maliciously scandalised through online disinformation campaigns; as was observed in a parliamentary by-election in 2025 in Uganda, where ill-informed allegations over an extramarital affair caused a rather popular and competent female candidate's parliamentary victory.

Comparative evidence from across the world vividly highlights the stakes. In Romania's 2024 presidential election, one candidate's TikTok content was recommended 4.6 to 14 times more frequently than that of his main rival, contributing to an unexpected first-round electoral outcome. Given Africa's younger electorates, weaker media ecosystems, and lower institutional trust, similar dynamics are likely to have even more destabilising effects.

Priority Policy Actions

- Recognise social media algorithms as electoral infrastructure and integrate algorithmic risk into election preparedness, observation, and audits.
- Mandate election-related platform transparency, including disclosure of recommendation practices, paid amplification thresholds, and language-specific moderation capacity.
- Address the private-platform blind spot through trusted civic reporting and non-intrusive oversight mechanisms.
- Invest in African-centred moderation and language capacity, particularly during elections.
- Move beyond literacy-only responses toward structural accountability, addressing algorithmic incentives and paid influence markets.
- Strengthen regional coordination through AU and REC-level frameworks to rebalance power asymmetries between individual states and global platforms.

Taken together, these findings reposition African voters not as passive users of global technologies but as rights-bearing participants in democratic systems increasingly shaped by algorithmic power. Making the unseen electorate visible is no longer optional; it is central to protecting electoral integrity in Africa's rapidly digitising democracies.

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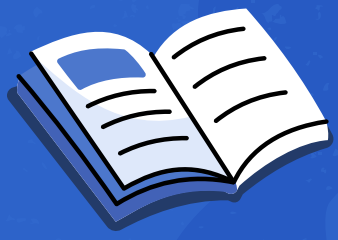
1.

Studying the Unseen Electorate in Africa



1.1 Study Objectives

This study sets out to investigate the impact of social media algorithms on African elections: whether they indeed influence voter behaviour and, if so, to what extent. The analysis also attempts to locate the role and potential of social media algorithms in creating new forms of digital disenfranchisement orchestrated and the unprecedented influence over democratic processes, including electoral outcomes, concentrated in the hands of global technology corporations. Consequently, the key objectives of this study include:

- Mapping algorithmic influence: analysis of how the curation algorithms on key platforms control the flow of political information and shape voter perceptions.
- Uncover systemic disenfranchisement by social media algorithms: investigation of how these systems may systematically amplify or suppress marginalised voices and create new barriers to equitable participation.
- Uncover the demographies with the greatest algorithmic disadvantage: an investigation of how they interact with existing social inequalities.
- Definition of pathways to accountability: Identification of concrete policy and technical measures that can be used to demand platform accountability for electoral integrity in Africa.

1.2 Geographic and Electoral Scope

The study centres on the assumption that algorithmic bias, if left unchecked, threatens the very foundations of electoral integrity and Africa's democracies. Our analysis draws on evidence from across the five regions of Africa. Critical qualitative and quantitative data have been collected in varying degrees from ten countries: Algeria, Angola, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Tunisia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The study is limited to Presidential Elections in the listed countries because of time and resource constraints and assumes that social media algorithms influence both political communication and public discourse.[2] Thus, by examining prior research and existing social media consumption trends, our analysis identifies patterns, themes, and gaps in algorithmic curation on public opinion during election periods. Major themes uncovered include echo chamber creation, misinformation and disinformation spread, foreign interference, and algorithmic bias.[3]

1.3 Mixed Methods Design

The study unpacks Africa's political and electoral vulnerabilities related to social media algorithmic influence on elections using a mixed-methods approach (MMR). Methodologies adopted are listed below.

[2] Snyder, 2019
[3] Moher et al., 2015

Method	Overview	Core Activities
Social Media Listening Experiment	Experimental social media listening to precisely determine the causal link or correlation between social media algorithms and the political information exposure of social media users.	The experiment followed these steps: • Participants Onboarding: Participants were onboarded, trained on goals, and signed consent. • Account Configuration: New dummy X accounts were configured based on location and split into "politically affiliated" and "non-political" personas. • Content on the "For You" feeds was actively monitored for 75 days. • Raw data was refined by anonymising PII and normalising engagement metrics. • Content was classified based on politicalness, sentiment, topics etc. using RoBERTa, Facebook BERT, and Llama zero-shot models. • Finally, metadata and engagement patterns were analysed to assess algorithmic alignment with assigned personas.
Qualitative Research	Qualitative methods were employed to examine the link between social media algorithms and African electoral outcomes, aiming to identify interventions to reshape algorithmic functions and their integration in African elections.	• 6 Key Informant Interviews • 1 Pan-African Focused Group Discussion
Comprehensive Integrated Review of existing literature,	A thorough review of both global and Africa-specific literature was conducted to explore the role of social media in elections, with a particular focus on how social media algorithms influence electoral processes and outcomes.	

1.4 Study Limitations

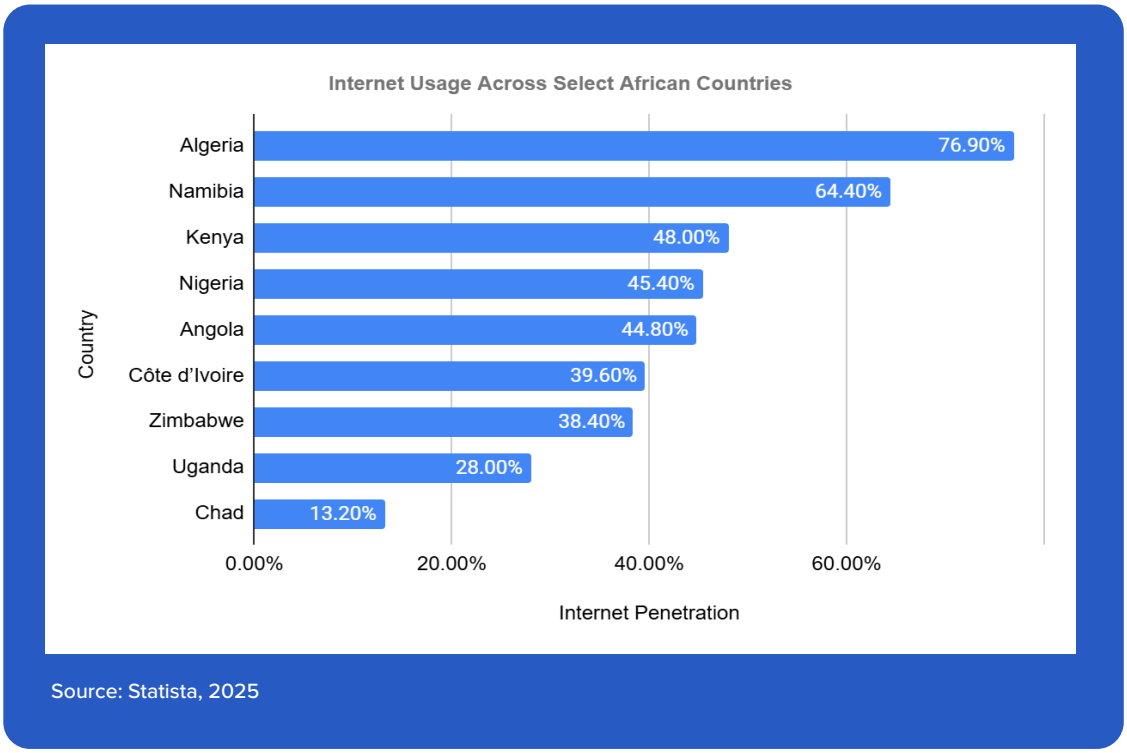
While the study adopted a ten-country comparative framework, the platform-based social media listening experiment was implemented in four countries, Kenya, Nigeria Namibia, and Uganda, all of them English-speaking, meaning that experimental findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than fully generalisable across all study countries. To minimise errors linked to automated translation and cross-language meaning loss, analysis was limited to English-language content, which may underrepresent political discourse expressed in local languages. Furthermore, limited access to independent platform transparency data constrained a deeper causal assessment; limitations that are widely recognised in contemporary social media, algorithm auditing, and digital governance research.

2.

Algorithms as Electoral Power in Africa

2.1 Social Media as Political and Electoral Infrastructure

Social media platforms are considered vital for 21st-century commerce and general communication and are increasingly fundamental in the political realm. Their influence is pervasive, shaping everything from political messaging and news dissemination to public policy communication, election monitoring, and mobilisation by civic movements and protesters.[4] While general Internet use is still limited on the continent compared to other regions, it is growing rapidly, with access reaching 38% in 2024, a 13 percentage point increase from 2019. However, this is still about half the average global access rate of 68% and largely trails other regions, Europe; 91%, Americas; 87%, Asia; 66% and Middle East; 70%, thus showcasing the need for improved broadband connectivity and device access.[5] The internet usage across the study countries is indicated below.[6]

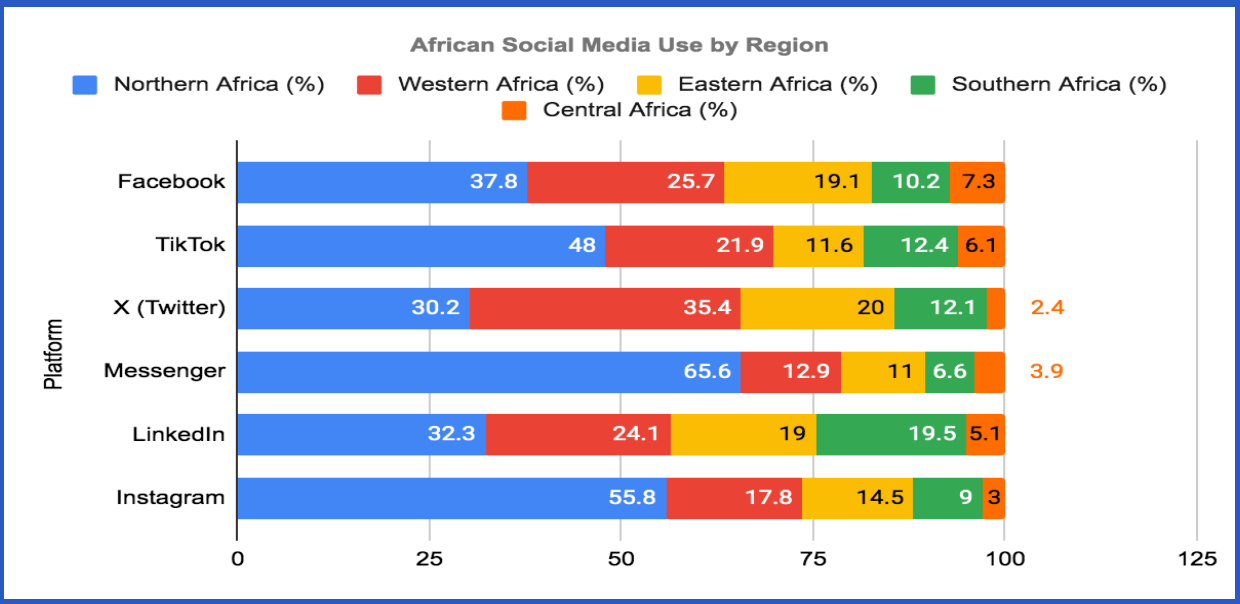


Source: Statista, 2025

Additionally, social media adoption also remains rapid and dynamic across the continent. For instance, in 2022, Africa had 384 million social media users, accounting for 7.1% of the 5.4 billion social media users globally and 67.8% of the 566million internet users on the continent.[7] Facebook remains the most dominant social media platform in Africa, with 82% of African social media users having a presence on the platform in 2023. Other digital platforms with widespread adoption among social media users in Africa include TikTok (60%), Instagram (54%), X (49%), LinkedIn (28%) and Snapchat (25%). X dominates news consumption, with 78% of X users actively following news channels and journalists, followed by Threads at 73%, and then Facebook, 68%; both META platforms.[8]

[4] Ajaegbu, O.O., Ajaegbu, C. 2024. The New democratisation: Social media impact on the political process in Sub-Saharan Africa. Available **here**
[5] ITU. 2024. Available **here**
[6] Statista. Share of internet users in Africa as of February 2025, by country. Available **here**
[7] Statista. 2022. Social Media use in Africa. Available **here**
[8] Geopoll. 2023. Social Media Usage Trends in Africa: Geopoll Report. Available **here**

Regardless, social media use is unevenly distributed across the five African regions. North Africa accounts for the majority of social media presence in Africa, dominating Messenger (65.6%), Instagram (55.6%), TikTok (48%), Facebook (37.8%), and LinkedIn (32.3%). West Africa dominates X, accounting for 35.4% of all African users, and also forms a significant proportion on Facebook (25.7%), LinkedIn (24.1%) and TikTok (21.9%). The Eastern and Southern Africa regions have the third- and fourth-largest representations, respectively, while the Central Africa region has the least representation across all platforms, with just 3%, 6.1%, and 2.4% share on Instagram, TikTok, and X, respectively.



Source: DataReportal, 2024

Social media platforms already rival traditional media as a news source. The platforms ranked third, after radio and TV, for news consumption in Africa in 2023, with 33% of Africans using social media daily to access news, closer to the 39% and 41% who used TV and radio, respectively. Overall, 45% of Africans reported consuming news on social media monthly or regularly, a 4% leap from 2021.[9] Still, geographical variations persist in social media news consumption across Africa. Mauritius leads Africa in digital news consumption, including social media, with 82% national access rates in 2023. Other major players include Gabon (79%), Morocco (74%), South Africa (74%), Seychelles (72%) and Cabo Verde (71%).[10] While significantly low consumption of digital news is witnessed in some jurisdictions, with just 14% consumption rate in Madagascar and 19% in Ethiopia and Uganda.[11]

Overall, rapid growth in reliance on digital news sources is evident across most African countries. For instance, Cameroon recorded the largest increase in social media use for news consumption, rising by 49% between 2014 and 2023. Gabon noted a rise of 45%, Togo (39%), Senegal (38%), Cote d'Ivoire and Mauritius each 37%, and Mali and Lesotho, each 32%, similarly experiencing major boosts.[12] Men consume digital news more, 48% access rate against women's 42%, with

[9] Amakah, K., Conroy-Krutz, J., Amewunou K. (2024). Africa's shifting media landscapes: Digital media use grows, but so do demographic divides. Afrobarometer Dispatch No.800. Available **here**
[10] Amakah, K., Conroy-Krutz, J., Amewunou K. (2024). Afrobarometer Dispatch No.800. Available **here**
[11] Ibid
[12] Ibid

youths 18-35years; 53%, significantly commanding a higher consumption of news on social media. More senior citizens (those over 55) were less likely to consume news on social media, with just 24% reporting access during the same period. Socioeconomic and geographic determinants also affected news consumption on social media: urban vs rural; (63% against 36%), social class; (high income 70%, low income 32%) and education levels; (e.g. primary education 24%, post-secondary 83%).[13]

A social media listening experiment conducted across four countries, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and Namibia, over a period of 75 days between December 2025 and February 2026 by our team uncovered integral utilisation of the X platform for both non-political and political intents. The study utilised 8 unique experimental X accounts equitably distributed across the four countries and across political and non-political affiliations/preferences.[14]

While non-political engagements on the platform are still more widespread, the intensity of political use is stronger, and the degree of online political engagement varies across the study countries. Overall, Kenya maintains the largest digital footprint observed in the study, with over 63209 total interactions recorded, closely followed by Nigeria (55486), then Uganda (33059), while Namibia has the smallest sample size, with just over 9583 feeds recorded over this period. Key country-based features uncovered from the study were as follows:

- Nigeria has the highest prevalence of non-political engagements on X, 83.5%, indicating a digital landscape dominated by general interest rather than solely political discourse;
- Namibia stands out as the most politically active country on X in the dataset, with a 40.3% political score across the monitored accounts, a figure much higher than in Uganda (21.5%), Kenya (23.06%) or Nigeria (17.34%).

Account Type Distribution by Country and Political Classification

Distribution of account types reveals distinct patterns between political and non-political classifications across countries.

		Political		Non-Political	
Country	Account Type	Totals	Percent	Totals	Percent
Kenya	Non-Political	9,975	22.50%	34,349	77.50%
Kenya	Political	4,355	23.06%	14,530	76.94%
Namibia	Non-Political	1,918	23.15%	6,366	76.85%
Namibia	Political	632	40.28%	937	59.72%
Nigeria	Non-Political	5,396	16.46%	27,379	83.54%
Nigeria	Political	6,559	28.88%	16,152	71.12%
Uganda	Non-Political	3,853	21.62%	13,969	78.38%
Uganda	Political	3,281	21.53%	11,956	78.47%

Source: CcHUB. Social Media Listening Experiment in Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda, 2025-2026

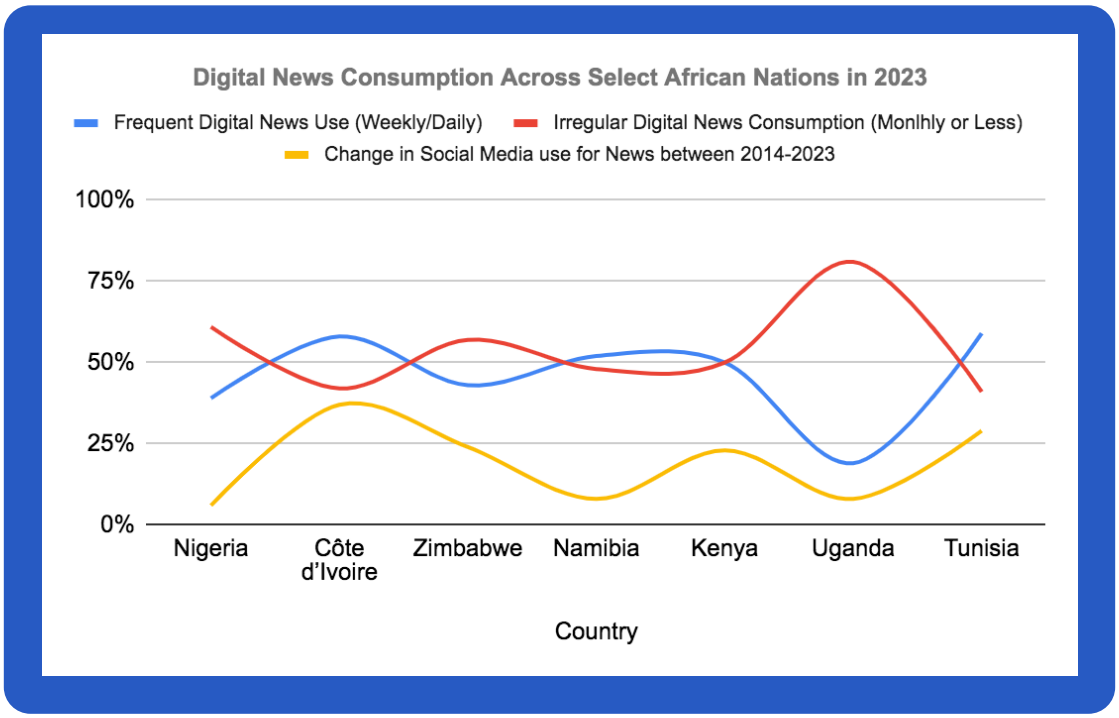
[13] Ibid
[14] More details on the social media experiment can be found on the methodology section

- Kenya shows a moderate, consistent distribution, with roughly 77% of accounts across both classifications remaining Non-Political although still showing strong pervasiveness of politics, political accounts are only 0.6% more political than its non-political ones.
- Uganda maintains a fixed baseline of roughly 78% non-political engagement across both groups.

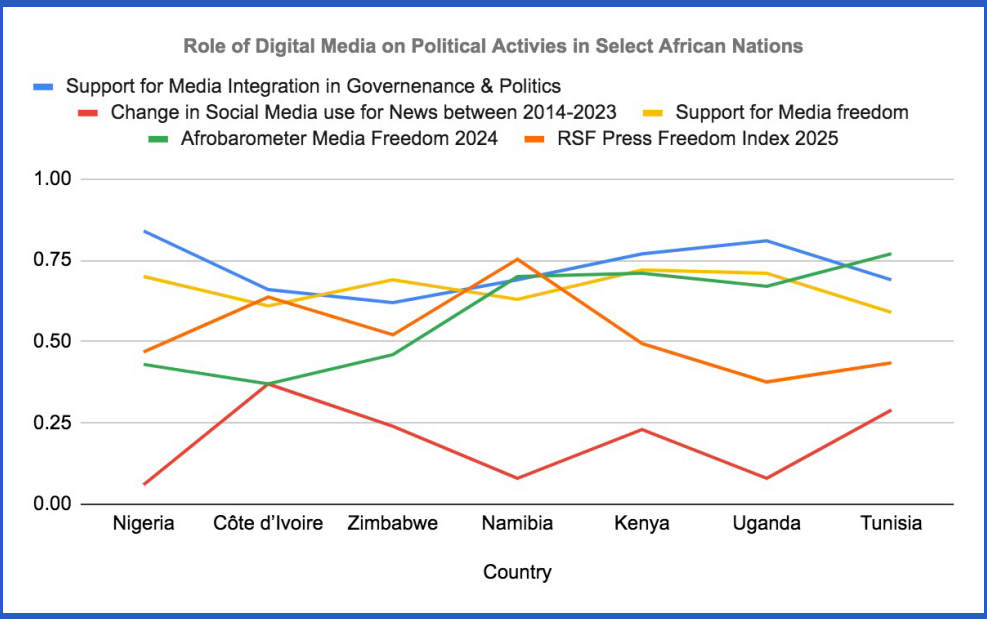
2.2 Patterns of Digital Political Engagement Across Africa

Independent studies show strong support for digital integration in politics by Africans: 72% support media (including social media) integration into governance and political accountability, and 65% approve of strengthened media freedom, including the freedom to publish views and ideas online without unnecessary government censorship. Support for the integration of media in politics and governance across select study countries is also strong, with that in Nigeria and Uganda at 84% and 81%, respectively, the highest. Support for digital integration in politics across other countries is as follows: Kenya; 77%, Namibia; 69%, Cote d'Ivoire; 66%, Angola; 62%, Zimbabwe; 62%. Overall, social media use enhances civic participation, with an average correlation of 37%; use of social media for expressive action at 41% is the strongest link yet.

Additionally other civic outcomes with strong correlation to social media use include political participation, online civic participation and information gathering - each having a 37% correlation, as well as offline civic participation, 33%.[15] Similarly, across all modes of internet use for civic participation, social media use has the highest impact, 29%, compared to 17% for general intent use.[16] It is also noteworthy that African countries with the highest growth in social media news consumption between 2014 and 2023 also posted the highest levels of media/press freedom in 2025.



[15] Jung H, Dai W, Albarracín D. How Social Media Algorithms Shape Offline Civic Participation: A Framework of Social-Psychological Processes. Perspect Psychol Sci. 2024 Sep;19(5):767-780. doi: 10.1177/17456916231198471.
[16] Jung H, Dai W, Albarracín D. How Social Media Algorithms Shape Offline Civic Participation: A Framework of Social-Psychological Processes. Perspect Psychol Sci. 2024 Sep;19(5):767-780. doi: 10.1177/17456916231198471. Epub 2023 Dec 7. PMID: 38060826; PMCID: PMC12421319.



Sources: Afrobarometer 2024, RSF Press Freedom Report 2025

Social media has already impacted multiple African elections, with key areas of application being: creation of political space for small parties and alternative political voices, e.g. being used by civil society organisations for electoral monitoring and keeping electoral bodies accountable.[17]

An evaluation of 600 X messages by six female politicians from South African political parties including the African National Congress, the Democratic Party (DP) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) found prevalence of diverse social media use by historically underrepresented female politicians among others: to promote their campaign agenda, challenge media gatekeeping (by dominant male counterparts), shape public discourse and perception, and for consolidation of political positions.[18] Similarly, in 2024, Ghanaian political parties showcased a strong presence on and reliance on social media platforms for political messaging to, among others: drive party agendas, engage voters, distribute creative content about policies and achievements, as well as circulate campaign-specific content, e.g. hashtags, creative pieces, memorable bites, catchy and engaging phrases in order to sustain voter attention.[19]

The rate of online political activity is thus significantly high in Africa, with a mean social media post collection latency on the X platform ranging from 24.4 to 26.6 hours in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and Namibia. Mean collection latency refers to the time between a post being generated (posted) and captured (going viral). Kenya shows a very narrow gap in collection latency between political and non-political accounts, indicating a uniform capture rate across user types, while in Nigeria, the non-political baseline accounts have a political score density of 0.431, demonstrating that even neutral accounts are significantly exposed to political content.[20] Similarly, the pervasiveness of political content on social media is notable, affecting both users who actively seek out political information and those who do not. For instance, on the X platform:

[17] https://theconversation.com/analysis-across-africa-shows-how-social-media-is-changing-politics-121577
[18] Matsilele, T., & Nkoala, S. (2023). Metavoicing, trust-building mechanisms and partisan messaging: a study of social media usage by selected South African female politicians. Information, Communication & Society, 26(13), 2575–2597. Available **here**
[19] Yussif , A. B., Agyepong , L., Odoom , D., Tindi , S., & Dick-Sagoe, C. (2024). Social Media and Political Communication in Ghana: Views of Inhabitants of Tema Metropolis . Information Impact: Journal of Information and Knowledge Management, 15(1), 30–46. Available **here**
[20] CcHUB Social Media Listening Experiment in Kenya, Namibia and Nigeria 2025

- Namibia has the highest peak political score density,[21] 0.557 for political accounts and 0.476 for non-political accounts and the sharpest contrast between account types (0.081) in political feeds, suggesting that X algorithms serve a higher concentration of political content to Namibian users compared to their counterparts. Although the engagement average for political accounts (25.0) is still slightly lower than non-political ones (26.4), hinting at a highly concentrated partisan content delivery
- Kenya's X ecosystem shows a near content score parity between political and non-political scores (0.466 vs 0.461) and very similar engagement averages (25.8 vs 26.6), suggesting a consistent digital landscape where user categorisation has little to no impact on the content served in the feed.
- In Nigeria, political accounts have a significantly higher concentration of political content (0.492) than non-political accounts (0.426), a difference of 0.066. However, the high baseline of 0.426 for non-political accounts still suggests that political messaging remains a dominant and common feature for the average user.
- Uganda showcased the most uniform results in the study, with identical political scores of 0.449 across both political and non-political accounts and nearly matching engagement averages (24.4 vs 24.5), representing a completely undifferentiated platform experience regardless of whether a user is classified as political or non-political.

Consequently, X serves as a high-velocity political arena amid the rapid emergence and broad diffusion of political content across the study countries, often reaching users who have explicitly expressed no interest in politics. This is evidenced by Namibia's high political content density, Kenya and Uganda's relatively uniform capture rates across all account types, and Nigeria's significant political exposure even among politically neutral accounts. This dynamic contrasts with Europe and North America, where political content is often more segmented and algorithmically dampened.[22] These findings suggest that non-political users in emerging democracies, such as in Africa, have weaker insulation from political content, and pervasive political amplification is more common.

Descriptive Metadata Audit

Distribution of account types metadata for each account type across the countries

	Political		Non-Political	
Country	Mean Collection Latency (Hours)	Peak Political Score Density	Mean Collection Latency (Hours)	Peak Political Score Density
Kenya	25.8	0.466	26.6	0.461
Namibia	25.0	0.557	26.4	0.476
Nigeria	24.7	0.492	25.8	0.426
Uganda	24.4	0.449	24.5	0.449

Source: CcHUB. Social Media Listening Experiment in Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda, 2025-2026

[21] How much political content appears on a user's feed
[22] European Union. Key Social Media Risks to Democracy: Risks from surveillance, personalisation, disinformation, moderation and microtargeting. Available **here**

Additionally, findings from a Pan-African knowledge sharing session with experts encompassing digital specialists, technologists, innovators, entrepreneurs and digital policy leaders, among others, on the impact of social media algorithms in African elections, revealed a dynamic scene, with convergence and divergences in digital political information consumption also noted. The platforms adopted for political messaging influence the audiences targeted, levels of trust in the information, and, most importantly, the accuracy of the message. For instance, in Namibia, WhatsApp and Facebook are considered primary platforms and aid in source tracking and flagging of inaccurate information, although one of the observers admitted to having previously shared an inaccurate screenshot due to misplaced trust.[23] X dominates as a key source for political news across the study countries, with the highest use in Nigeria and Kenya. The platform's rapid adoption by government officials in Kenya for policy communication was also noted, affirming its utility for rapid information and as a source for policy engagement.[24]

Mapping of Social Media Use across Africa

Social media use in Africa is strategically segmented across platforms based on content and relational purposes, indicating a mature, targeted digital engagement landscape. This pattern suggests a deliberate, strategic approach to utility maximisation in platform choice among African social media users. Emerging trends of platform use include:[25]

- X is consistently preferred for high-speed dissemination of current political and financial information, rapid-fire updates, and government-related "secrets" (emerging stories), though some users perceive it as an aggressive "war zone" while others engage with it for humour.
- LinkedIn is universally adopted for professional networking, with emerging recognition of its evolution into a platform for short-form video content and even personal connections.
- Facebook maintains a strong position due to its broad reach, penetration across diverse demographics, and support for versatile multimedia, serving as a critical source for local updates and general engagement.
- TikTok and Instagram are primary platforms for entertainment, humour, and lifestyle content, with Instagram also serving as a professional tool for visual media creators.
- Use of YouTube is largely skewed toward long-form content and event livestreaming, though Facebook livestreaming is also widely used.
- The rise of private/semi-private messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram is also noteworthy, particularly for rapid communication and the sharing of journalistic stories, with increased use of WhatsApp's evolving "Status" and "Channels" features, demonstrating ongoing experimentation with digital communication formats.

[23] Pan-African Focus Group Discussion on the Impact of Social Media Algorithms on Elections in Africa
[24] Pan-African Focus Group Discussion on the Impact of Social Media Algorithms on Elections in Africa
[25] Pan-African Focus Group Discussion on the Impact of Social Media Algorithms on Elections in Africa

However, trust in social media platforms remains relatively low, with actors noting that politicians often buy digital influence to push specific messages, necessitating users to discern propaganda. This concern is majorly affirmed by stakeholders regarding Nigeria and Kenya, with one digital specialist based in Nigeria noting the growing consumption of digital political content in the country, specifically from a number of key handles and expressing his ongoing caution over sharing such content due to the difficulty in identifying paid content.[26] Such fears are warranted; there is a significant negative sentiment associated with politically leaning accounts, 82%, compared to just 40% for non-political accounts. With the Namibian and Nigerian X ecosystem exhibiting significant negative sentimental scores of 82.6% and 82.4%, respectively on politically-aligned accounts compared to just 39.8% and 41.1% on non-political accounts.[27]

Correlational Analysis of Politicality and Sentiment

Distribution of account types: correlation of average political score with tweet sentiment across countries

	Political			Non-Political		
Country	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Kenya	81.37%	79.92%	79.92%	40.68%	36.21%	30.55%
Namibia	82.38%	80.80%	78.59%	41.12%	38.16%	33.27%
Nigeria	82.64%	79.97%	79.90%	39.80%	35.59%	29.81%
Uganda	82.00%	80.59%	79.44%	39.68%	34.56%	29.51%

Source: CcHUB. Social Media Listening Experiment in Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda, 2025-2026

For instance, one of the stakeholders observed encountering purported investigative material regarding a Nigerian president's alleged meddling in Benin, which later proved to be inaccurate. Similarly, a message from a prominent international figure naming Nigeria as a country of particular interest in 2025 highlighted the possibility of foreign influence via social media. This international message caused significant surprise, prompting an official denial from the Nigerian government. It also ignited a politically and tribally divisive discussion on X, which some opposition supporters interpreted as a potential force for political transformation.[28]

2.3 Algorithmic Visibility, Influence, and Democratic Risk

Social media algorithms influence offline civic engagement, such as voting, in several ways. They curate political information for users, reinforcing existing beliefs by highlighting content aligned with their interests. Conversely, they can also expose users to new information, which promotes decision-making through content priming, action, and continuity. Furthermore, these algorithms help political actors build social capital and community by facilitating the sharing of knowledge, resources, and skills. They are also instrumental in planning offline political activities, including voting and campaigns.[29]

[26] Pan-African Focus Group Discussion on the Impact of Social Media Algorithms on Elections in Africa
[27] CcHUB Social Media Listening Experiment in Kenya, Namibia and Nigeria 2025
[28] Drawn from insights from the Pan-African Focus Group Discussion
[29] Jung H, Dai W, Albarracín D. How Social Media Algorithms Shape Offline Civic Participation: A Framework of Social-Psychological Processes. Perspect Psychol Sci. 2024 Sep;19(5):767-780. doi: 10.1177/17456916231198471. Epub 2023 Dec 7. PMID: 38060826; PMCID: PMC12421319.

However, while crucial for civic engagement, social media algorithms possess an inherent bias documented by numerous studies. This bias is driven by commercial incentives and user behaviour, leading to the disproportionate amplification of specific ideological and political views. Such algorithmic bias skews the political playing field, as it over-represents certain viewpoints in users' feeds, consequently influencing public opinion throughout political campaigns. Therefore, the continued, unrestrained deployment of these algorithms by platforms like TikTok, X, and Facebook does more than just create a curated user experience and political stance; it poses a significant and real threat to electoral outcomes across Africa.[30]

The rapid surge in Calin Georgescu's popularity during the 2024 Romanian Presidential Elections highlights a significant democratic risk. Independent assessments showed that content from his controversial campaign which included advocating to end aid to Ukraine and making unfounded claims about microchips in beverages was recommended on platforms like TikTok at a rate of 4.6 to 14 times more frequently than that of his primary rival, Elena Lasconi. This extraordinary algorithmic efficiency propelled Georgescu to the leading position in the first round of voting. The possibility of similar, algorithmically-driven political outcomes emerging across Africa represents a danger to democracy that must not be ignored.[31]

2.4 Why African Electoral Systems Are Structurally Exposed

While social media integration in African elections is rapidly growing, some core democratic and governance constraints persist. Such include:

- Electoral misinformation that often translates to offline violence
- Government-imposed internet and social media shutdowns such as those in Ethiopia in 2019,[32] and Uganda in 2016 and 2026.[33] [34]
- Restrictive cybercrime laws that limit political expression online.[35]

For instance, Tanzania banned the spread of “false” information under its Cybercrime Act, with the definition of what constitutes false content remaining unclear and controversial. Recently, a Tanzanian social media influencer, Jennifer Jovine, was charged with treason under this law for merely sharing a dance on TikTok post-2025 elections.[36] Other challenges with social media adoption in African elections include political communication inefficiencies, e.g., information overload and confusion, as well as, most recently and increasingly, public opinion shaping and voter manipulation via social media algorithms.

[30] Bakshy et al. (2015) and Aral (2020)
[31] Adina, J. 2025. The Impact of Social Media on Political Discourse and Democracy: The Case of Romania. Available **here**
[32] Mbah, F. 2019. Outrage over Ethiopia’s continuing internet backout. Available **here**
[33] Maractho, E.C. 2023. Social Media, Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Uganda. Available **here**
[34] https://achpr.au.int/en/news/press-releases/2026-01-16/press-release-suspension-public-internet-access-uganda
[35]https://www.gp-digital.org/publication/an-ever-tightening-net-restrictions-on-online-expression-under-cybercrime-laws-and-content-restrictions-in-africa-the-middle-east-and-turkiye/
[36] https://www.3music.tv/section/news/article/tanzanian-influencer-jennifer-jovin-arrested-for-alleged-treason-after-viral-tiktok-dance-2025-11-11

3.

Evidence and Blind Spots: What Research Tells Us

3.1 How Algorithms Shape Political Information and Behaviour

Social media algorithms are digital tools that select and prioritise content based on a user's prior activity and engagement on a platform.[37] These tools often deliver content that aligns with the user's apparent interests. In political contexts, this personalisation can lock users into a cycle of receiving similar political information, which reinforces pre-existing views. Multiple studies reveal that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube continuously employ sophisticated algorithms that present users with personalised content, often reinforcing existing political beliefs and resulting in political echo chambers and algorithmic bias. This has raised concerns about the potential for algorithms to polarise political opinions, limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, and even spread misinformation during critical periods such as election campaigns.[38]

3.2 Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, Political Polarisation, and Information Asymmetries

By strategically filtering out contrary perspectives, social media algorithms contribute to the formation of "echo chambers" in which individuals are rarely exposed to diverse viewpoints. The consequence is a more polarised electorate, as individuals become more rigid and ingrained in their beliefs, views, and political positions, and less inclined to engage in open dialogue or compromise. This reality is particularly problematic during election campaigns, as the resulting limited exposure to diverse information restricts opportunities for balanced public discourse and exacerbates ideological segregation.[39] [40]

However, the impact of social media algorithms on the political ideologies of individuals already holding strong political affiliations is rather limited.[41] Instead, algorithms mostly affect individuals within the undecided block of voters.[42] Additionally, other studies question the extent of algorithms' impact, even for this category of voters, as most users' social media networks are ideologically mixed, allowing them access to diverse viewpoints. For instance, 53% and 39% Facebook and X users respectively in the US reported having networks with mixed political ideology.[43] Regardless, the general consensus exists that there is a reasonable link between social media algorithm-mediated political content and users' potential to harden their existing political stance.[44] [45]

Social media algorithms thus cement political polarisation by consistently presenting users with content that reinforces their existing views, eventually creating an environment ripe for disinformation campaigns that exploit existing social and political divisions. Consequently, this exacerbates polarisation, undermines constructive political dialogue, a pattern observed in elections globally.[46]

[37] Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. Science, 348(6239), 1130-1132.
[38] Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015), and Pariser, E. (2011).
[39] Pariser, E. (2011). The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You. Penguin Press.
[40] Sunstein, 2017
[41] Epstein, R., & Robertson, R. E. (2015). The search engine manipulation effect (SEME) and its possible impact on the outcomes of elections. Proceedings of the national academy of sciences, 112(33), E4512-E4521.
[42] Epstein, R., & Robertson, R. E. (2015). The search engine manipulation effect (SEME) and its possible impact on the outcomes of elections. Proceedings of the national academy of sciences, 112(33), E4512-E4521.
[43] Margetts, H. 2017. Of course social media is transforming politics. But it's not to blame for Brexit and Trump. Available **here**
[44] Moore, T. 2017. How Algorithms Can Impact Online Civil Rights Movements. Available **here**
[45] https://www.facebook.com/help/166738576721085
[46] Tucker et al. (2018) and Klinger & Svensson (2015)

3.3 Misinformation, Disinformation, and Manipulative Amplification

Social media algorithms also pose a direct threat to democratic processes by systematically amplifying misinformation, particularly during election cycles. Their design, which prioritises user engagement, inevitably elevates sensational and often false narratives, thereby manipulating public opinion and voter behaviour.[47] Given these systems' inherent inability to reliably distinguish between factual reporting and disinformation, the burden of truth verification is overwhelming. Consequently, social media platforms must be mandated to enforce rigorous content moderation protocols and commit to radical transparency in the curation and dissemination of political information.[48] [49]

3.4 External Influence: Platform Power, Opacity, and Accountability Gaps

Social media algorithms also present an international face, offering external actors ready tools for political interference. Disinformation efforts are no longer constrained by national boundaries; instead, they are frequently orchestrated by international entities aiming to sway foreign elections. By prioritising engagement over factual accuracy, social media algorithms serve as potent tools for international actors to manipulate public opinion worldwide. This situation necessitates urgent action, calling for stronger international regulations and regional cooperation to curb the impact of social media algorithms on political processes across Africa. Noteworthy instances include the impact of President Trump's online comment on the security of Nigeria, the involvement of Russian Bots in the 2016 US Elections, and Cambridge Analytica's work in Kenya in the 2013 Presidential Elections.[50]

Additionally, limited transparency in algorithmic operations remains a key concern. The lack of credible information on the operational mandates and dynamics of algorithms means that users are often unaware of how their information consumption is being shaped by algorithmic choices.[51] Without a clear understanding or oversight, users report a general lack of awareness of how algorithms shape the information they consume and, by extension, their political opinions. This opacity poses a significant challenge for regulators and policymakers seeking to protect democratic processes from undue manipulation. This lack of accountability presents challenges for regulators, who must balance the need to protect free speech with the need to prevent the manipulation of voters through algorithmic curation.[52]

[47] Landmark events such as the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and the Brexit referendum serve as clear historical evidence of this algorithmic weaponisation.
[48] Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31(2), 211-236.
[49] Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) and Bradshaw and Howard (2019).
[50] Bradshaw and Howard (2019
[51] Vaidhyanathan, 2018
[52] Vaidhyanathan, S. (2018). Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy. Oxford University Press.

3.5 Why Africa Requires Distinct Evidence and Policy Responses

As social media algorithms, “the unseen electorates”, increasingly shape elections globally, the growing use of social media platforms for political campaigns remains central to electoral transparency, integrity, inclusivity, and democratisation in Africa. Additionally, while multiple studies have covered the relationship between social media use in elections, a limited number have focused specifically on the mechanisms through which social media algorithms themselves affect electoral outcomes, e.g. by shaping public opinion during campaigns and influencing voting patterns.[53] Where such studies exist, African elections remain widely underresearched, with the majority of such studies mostly addressing Western Democracies and elections in other jurisdictions, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics play out in non-Western contexts or emerging democracies, specifically in Africa, where social media use for political news consumption and political campaigning is already skyrocketing.[54] [55]

As a result, with political campaigns increasingly moving online, the potential for algorithms to influence voter behaviour and the outcome of elections raises important ethical and regulatory questions.[56] Addressing these issues is critical for ensuring the integrity of democratic processes and promoting a more informed electorate. This reality is especially stark in Africa, where democratisation and electoral integrity continue to face critical constraints and, at the same time, underwhelming investment by global digital corporations (BigTech) in content moderation, with the majority based in the West (Europe and North America) or in the East (China, India, Japan).

[53] Tucker et al., 2018
[54] Aral, 2020
[55] Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017
[56] Vaidhyanathan, 2018

4.

The Landscape of Social Media Algorithms in African Elections

Social media algorithms emerge not just as a neutral technical system but as infrastructural forces that quietly reshape what political information becomes visible, credible, and influential during elections. While the degree of intentional engagement with algorithms varied across countries, participants consistently emphasised that social media platforms reward speed, emotional resonance, and strategic manipulation, often at the expense of verification and inclusive deliberation.

Our findings reveal six interconnected dynamics that illustrate both the strategic exploitation of platforms and their structural consequences for electoral integrity in African contexts namely:

- Presence of coordinated exploitation of platform logics by political actors
- Algorithmic privileging of emotion and marginalisation of factual discourse
- AI-enhanced misinformation and disinformation
- The crisis of content verification: language and culture
- Structural gaps in platform governance
- The mediated influence and erosion of electoral trust

A systematic evaluation of these core issues is presented below.

4.1 Coordinated Exploitation of Platform Logics

Political actors in Africa have transitioned from passive platform users to strategic operators who deliberately engineer content to exploit algorithmic affordances. This professionalisation turns algorithmic bias into a core campaign tool, suggesting that the problem of digital misinformation during elections is fundamentally one of institutionalised manipulation rather than spontaneous falsehood. An election monitoring expert and a journalist, both based in Nigeria, described the systematic nature of these operations as follows:

> **"The major political party from the PDP to the APC to the ADC, they all have what I call... fake news machines... people who go on Twitter, on Facebook, on WhatsApp, on TikTok, on Instagram to try to manipulate content to sell their candidates."**
>
> **– Technology Specialist, Nigeria**

> **"We always assume that politicians are not smart, but they are smarter. The same politicians will recruit the best of the best brains to craft grammar to defend themselves online. I see the same category of people who will request those whose own Torah is just to churn out fake news to swindle people."**
>
> **– Media Practitioner, Nigeria.**

The activities of digital political actors are widely supported by an enabling algorithmic environment that favours political content. For instance, the content digital reach capabilities across Kenya, Uganda, Namibia and Nigeria demonstrate an algorithmic preference for political discourse on X, where political content achieves between 2.5× and 3.6× the effective visibility (V_{eff}) of non-political posts.

- Uganda and Nigeria demonstrate the most potent amplification; political content in these nations achieves over 3.3 times the reach beyond that of generic/non-political topics, with Nigeria's political visibility (3.19%) dwarfing the mere 0.96% baseline for non-political feeds.
- Kenya follows a similar trajectory, where political posts enjoy a 3.35× political visibility advantage over general-interest content despite the latter's massive volume, nearly 49,000 interactions.
- Namibia, which maintains the highest overall visibility rates in the study, political content still commands 2.5× more reach than its neutral counterparts. Ultimately, these figures confirm that the platforms in these regions act as political megaphones, where a "Political" classification serves as the primary catalyst for reach, systematically marginalising the visibility of general-interest user needs.

Effective visibility on X is measured as: $V_{eff} = \frac{(Likes+Retweets)}{Impressions} \times PoliticalScore$

Political vs Non-Political Metrics by Country

Impression-to-Engagement Ratios and Reach Dynamics.

Effective visibility calculated as: $V_{eff} = \frac{L+R}{I} \times S_p$ where L = likes, R = retweets, I = impressions, S_p = political score.

	Political			Non-Political		
Country	Totals	Raw Engagement	Effective Visibility	Totals	Raw Engagement	Effective Visibility
Kenya	14,330	1,978.50	2.49%	48,879	1,065.00	0.74%
Namibia	2,550	10,800.00	4.03%	7,303	5,648.00	1.60%
Nigeria	11,955	1,386.00	3.19%	43,531	628.00	0.96%
Uganda	7,134	1,935.00	3.51%	25,925	928.00	0.96%

Source: CcHUB. Social Media Listening Experiment in Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda, 2025-2026

These figures confirm that the algorithm functions as a systemic political amplifier in these markets, where a post's classification as "Political" acts as a catalyst for enhanced reach, effectively marginalising general interest topics and drowning out non-political user needs.[57]

[57] CcHUB (2025). Social Media Listening Experiment in Kenya, Namibia, Uganda, and Nigeria.

This evidence points to a shift in how political competition unfolds in digitally mediated contexts. Digital political campaigners have learned to operationalise platform logics as campaign infrastructure rather than being constrained by platform rules. The sophistication extends to platform-specific tailoring, with campaigns adapting messaging to different algorithmic reward systems, as a Uganda-based technologist observes as follows:

> **"TikTok is for sensational videos, WhatsApp is used for broadcast messaging... Twitter is more elite, more fact-checked."**
>
> **– Tech Policy Specialist, Uganda.**

Strengthening Algorithmic Knowledge: What emerges is a form of algorithmic literacy among political elites; an understanding of how different platforms prioritise, distribute, and monetise content. This finding challenges assumptions that algorithmic harms result primarily from user ignorance or platform negligence. The evidence suggests that certain political actors possess sophisticated knowledge of platform mechanics and deploy it strategically to gain electoral advantage. Actors observe intense professionalisation, noting that political actors intentionally buy influence on platforms. However, an observer reckons that the Namibian case reveals a contrasting pattern characterised by the absence of coordinated strategic engagement.

> **"Political parties don't necessarily use it for positioning... they use it for forwarding false or questionable narratives."**
>
> **– Internet Governance Policy Leader, Namibia**

Regardless, the perceived absence of structure does not reduce algorithmic impact but shifts its nature. Where Nigerian and Ugandan parties exploit algorithms through coordination, Namibian parties leave algorithmic spaces ungoverned, creating vacuums where rumour and distortion circulate unchecked. Algorithmic influence operates through neglect: what digital platforms fail to moderate, contextualise, or challenge, and African governments are hesitant to regulate effectively. This suggests that the relationship between political strategy and algorithmic harm is non-linear. Both strategic exploitation and strategic absence can produce electoral distortion, though through different mechanisms. The implication for platform governance is that effective intervention must address coordinated manipulation and the harms that emerge when political communication is algorithmically mediated without institutional oversight.

Digital Campaigns are Heavily Monetised: Observers note rapidly growing investment in digital political influence operations across Africa. Such moves have become standard campaign expenditures, with political candidates reserving incremental budgets for social media influencers and political ads. The monetisation of influence reveals how algorithmic politics reproduces economic inequality.

Candidates with greater financial resources can purchase visibility, hire elite influencers, and sustain coordinated campaigns that less-resourced competitors cannot match. This transforms elections from contests of ideas or organisational capacity into competitions over who can most effectively buy algorithmic amplification. Financial resources further determine algorithmic visibility, creating cycles of advantage that compound economic inequality.

> **"He who has more money has more influence... they're more able to pay for targeted ads... to hire influencers, musicians, celebrities that people attach emotions to."**
>
> **– Digital Rights Advocate, Uganda**

Wealthier candidates can purchase visibility through paid promotion, while less-resourced campaigns struggle to reach audiences organically. Since organic reach is increasingly constrained by platform design, paid amplification becomes necessary for political viability. This transforms electoral competition into a contest determined significantly by advertising budgets, disadvantaged grassroots campaigns, independent candidates, and parties representing economically marginalised constituencies. The algorithmic privileging of paid content functions as a mechanism of class-based political exclusion.

Inequities of Algorithmic Positioning: The strategic use of algorithms often targets opponents through the amplification of scandal and controversy, with particularly pronounced gendered dimensions, as witnessed in Uganda in 2025.

> **"They took her picture, and they created the controversy... People knew more about that content than they did about her as a political candidate."**
>
> **– Digital Rights Advocate, Uganda**

This illustrates how algorithmic amplification shapes what becomes politically salient beyond simply spreading existing content. For instance, female candidates are often made visible through scandal rather than policy, suggesting that algorithms actively produce gendered bias by rewarding controversy over substance. The political consequence is that algorithmic systems constrain women's participation by consistently amplifying antagonistic content over representational discourse, thereby producing forms of political silencing that extend beyond direct harassment.

Consequently, the consequences of algorithmic bias extend beyond just information exposure to the reproduction and amplification of existing social and economic inequalities. Women in politics face harassment that is algorithmically amplified because it generates engagement. In this regard, retrogressive culturally held narratives thrive when users subscribing to such beliefs click share or like buttons.

> "...They (women) are told you don't belong here... you belong in the kitchen... even well-established women with PhDs."
>
> – Tech Policy Specialist, Uganda

This reveals how algorithms actively intensify gendered harassment rather than simply transmitting it by treating engagement as a signal of relevance. Attacks on women candidates circulate widely because they provoke reaction, which platforms interpret as value![58] The result is that harassment becomes a mechanism of political silencing enabled by algorithmic architecture. Women must either endure amplified abuse or withdraw from digital political spaces, both of which constrain democratic participation.

4.2 Algorithmic Privileging of Emotion and the Marginalisation of Factual Discourse

Algorithms consistently privilege content that generates high engagement, systematically favouring sensational, controversial, and emotionally charged material over factual or policy-based discourse. This creates structural conditions where misinformation gains traction through virality rather than accuracy, particularly during sensitive electoral moments. Observations by experts showcase this grim reality as follows:

> "Most of the images we received and verified, which people claimed showed recent election violence, were not from the Anambra election at all. They were actually from the 2019 and 2023 general elections. For whatever reason, people chose to do this–whether to create tension, suppress participation, or fuel emotionally charged online narratives–these actions contributed to misinformation and unnecessary escalation."
>
> – Fact Checking Expert, Nigeria

> "The thing with the algorithm is that it's definitely going to push controversial content because that is the content that has the most engagement."
>
> – Digital Rights Advocate, Uganda

These observations point to a fundamental tension between platform business models and democratic communication. Platforms profit from engagement, which drives advertising revenue, but engagement correlates most strongly with emotional arousal rather than informational accuracy.[59] The result is an economic logic that structurally disadvantages the kind of deliberative, policy-focused discourse that democratic theory presumes elections require.[60]

[58] Koch, L., Ghawi, R., Pfeffer, J., & Steinert, J. I. (2025). Online ..misogyny against female candidates in the 2022 Brazilian elections: a threat to women's political representation?. Information, Communication & Society, 1-21.
[59] Leppert, K., Saliterer, I., & Korać, S. (2022). The role of emotions for citizen engagement via social media–A study of police departments using twitter. Government Information Quarterly, 39(3), 101686.
[60] Ștefănel, A. (2025). Social Media and the Deliberative Disintegration of Political Communication: Citizen-Candidate Dynamics on Facebook During Electoral Campaigns. Applied Media Studies

The reach of X algorithms across Kenya, Namibia, Uganda, and Nigeria is fundamentally powered by high-intensity negative sentiment, which serves as the primary "visibility unlock" for political content.

- In Kenya, negative political posts average 70,000 impressions, surpassing the 56,000 generated by non-political content, despite the latter having twice the total volume.
- Namibia exhibits an even more extreme distortion, where negative political discourse captures a staggering 263,000 impressions, the highest in the study, proving that friction-heavy content is the dominant currency in that market.[61]

This trend is mirrored across the region: the political share of user feeds consistently triples when sentiment shifts from positive to negative, most notably in Nigeria, where it jumps from 9.99% to 31.99%. These metrics reveal a systemic algorithmic bias that rewards high-intensity negativity, effectively sidelining constructive or general-interest topics in favour of divisive political signalling.[62]

Sentiment-Driven Reach and Engagement Across Political and Non-Political Content

Average Impressions and Engagement *where (Engagement = likes +retweets)* by sentiment, highlighting the amplification of emotionally charged content in Kenya, Nigeria and Namibia

	Political				Non-Political			
Sentiment	Total Feeds	Percent	Engagement	Impressions	Total Feeds	Percent	Engagement	Impressions
Kenya								
Negative	7,125	32.47%	2,516	70,000	14,815	67.53%	1,124	56,000
Neutral	5,679	21.08%	1,393	53,000	21,266	78.92%	1,042	46,500
Positive	1,526	10.65%	2,368	53,000	12,798	89.35%	1,046	33,000
Namibia								
Negative	1,310	37.77%	16,200	263,000	2,158	62.23%	8,768	212,000
Neutral	966	23.17%	5,910	140,000	3,204	76.83%	5,252	117,000
Positive	274	12.37%	8,500	131,500	1,941	87.63%	4,363	75,000
Nigeria								
Negative	5,716	31.99%	2,178	42,000	12,154	68.01%	730	26,000
Neutral	4,959	19.99%	966	28,000	19,850	80.01%	608	21,000
Positive	1,280	9.99%	982	20,000	11,527	90.01%	577	14,000
Uganda								
Negative	3,383	34.15%	2,937	59,000	6,523	65.85%	1,501	58,000
Neutral	2,836	19.49%	1,276	39,000	11,713	80.51%	820	30,000
Positive	915	10.63%	1,381	32,000	7,689	89.37%	718	18,000

Source: CcHUB. Social Media Listening Experiment in Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda, 2025-2026

Prioritisation of engagement-heavy content is a design feature rather than a technical glitch. Social media algorithms are functioning as intended, maximising user attention and interaction, but these intended functions produce unintended political consequences.[63] The marginalisation of factual content emerges from the alignment between algorithmic optimisation and emotional content, rather than from accidental oversight, as digital policy experts and technologists across Africa describe experiencing what is considered the algorithms' worst implication: the progressive narrowing of political exposure through feedback loops, otherwise known as political filter bubbles or echo chambers.[64]

[61] CcHUB (2025). Social Media Listening Experiment in Kenya, Namibia, Uganda, and Nigeria
[62] Ibid
[63] Christiano, T. (2022). Algorithms, manipulation, and democracy. Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 52(1), 109-124.
[64] Christiano, T. (2022). Algorithms, manipulation, and democracy. Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 52(1), 109-124.

> **"Algorithms push users more of what they interact with, leading to exclusion of alternative views."**
>
> **– Media Practitioner, Nigeria**

> **"Influential media figures can drive narratives within their follower base, reinforcing echo chambers."**
>
> **– Data Analyst, Nigeria**

The echo chamber effect operates through personalisation algorithms that interpret engagement as preference.[65] Users who interact with particular political content are algorithmically sorted into audiences presumed to want more of the same. Over time, this reduces exposure to alternative perspectives because platforms construct filter bubbles algorithmically rather than because users actively seek them. The political implication is that voters increasingly encounter elections through incompatible information environments, making shared political reality difficult to sustain.[66]

4.3 AI-Enhanced Misinformation and the Crisis of Verification

The emergence of AI-generated content represents a qualitative shift in the misinformation landscape, fundamentally altering the conditions under which voters can distinguish true from false claims. AI tools lower barriers to creating credible-seeming disinformation, challenging the very possibility of verification for ordinary citizens.

> **"If you think (sic) about literacy (digital), I would say no, I've seen many educated people fall prey to stuff like that as well."**
>
> **– Electoral Data Analyst, Nigeria**

This observation challenges a common assumption in digital literacy interventions that education and critical thinking skills provide sufficient protection against misinformation. If professionally produced AI-generated content deceives even educated users, then the problem is one of technological asymmetry rather than primarily individual capability.[67]

Additionally, the resources required to produce sophisticated synthetic content are now far lower than the expertise required to detect it, creating a structural advantage for those seeking to deceive.[68] The evolution from text and image manipulation to synthetic audio represents a particularly concerning development because it exploits deeply embedded trust in auditory cues.

[65] Tasente, T. (2025). Understanding the Dynamics of Filter Bubbles in Social Media Communication: A Literature Review. Vivat Academia, 1-21.
[66] Ibid
[67] Nygren, T., & Efimova, E. (2025). Investigating the long-term impact of misinformation interventions in upper secondary education. Plos one, 20(7), e0326928.
[68] Leibowicz, C. R., McGregor, S., & Ovadya, A. (2021, July). The deepfake detection dilemma: A multistakeholder exploration of adversarial dynamics in synthetic media. In Proceedings of the 2021 AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society (pp. 736-744).

> **"You listen to it, and it's the exact voice... you're like, how is this fake?"**
>
> **– Tech Policy Specialist, Uganda**

Audio carries social authority that text and images do not. People are accustomed to trusting what they hear, particularly when it sounds like a familiar voice.[69] Synthetic audio, therefore, bypasses scepticism that users might apply to written claims or edited images. During elections, fabricated audio of candidates making inflammatory statements or admitting corruption can shape perception rapidly and durably, even when debunked, because the initial emotional impact of hearing the voice creates lasting impressions.[70] An expert framed AI as a broader potential enabler of electoral manipulation in Africa.

> **"With the prevalence of social media, it's easier for false claims to get spread around without being caught or for things to be completely fabricated with AI."**
>
> **– CivicTech Founder, Nigeria**

The potential for AI scalability transforms isolated incidents of misinformation into systemic phenomena. While earlier forms of electoral manipulation required intense human labour to produce and distribute false content, AI enables automation. A single actor can generate thousands, if not millions, of synthetic texts, images, videos, and audio clips and distribute them across platforms simultaneously. This overwhelms both platform moderation systems and civil society fact-checking efforts, which often cannot scale at the same pace.[71] The result is that corrective information struggles to keep pace with the volume of falsehood.

Consequently, speed emerged as a critical factor. False political claims shape perception before corrective information has time to circulate, particularly when amplified by algorithms during high-attention electoral periods. A focus group participant described the burden this places on individual users.

> **"Personal verification efforts and learning from mistakes when mistakenly sharing false content."**
>
> **– Digital Creator, Namibia**

This reality places unrealistic demands on individual users to verify content in real time. Even conscientious users who attempt verification may initially share false content, only recognising the error later. By that point, however, the content has already circulated through their networks. The

[69] Babutsidze, Z., Hanaki, N., & Zylbersztejn, A. (2021). Nonverbal content and trust: An experiment on digital communication. Economic Inquiry, 59(4), 1517-1532.
[70] Kischinhevsky, M., Vieira, I. M., dos Santos, J. G. B., Chagas, V., Freitas, M. D. A., & Aldé, A. (2020). WhatsApp audios and the remediation of radio: Disinformation in Brazilian 2018 presidential election. radio journal: international studies in broadcast & audio media, 18(2), 139-158.
[71] Micallef, N., Armacost, V., Memon, N., & Patil, S. (2022). True or false: Studying the work practices of professional fact-checkers. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 6(CSCW1), 1-44.

temporal dynamics of algorithmic amplification favour misinformation because falsehood can achieve viral spread before truth has time to respond. This reverses the traditional assumption that truth will eventually prevail in open debate, because human-algorithmic interactions reward speed and emotional impact rather than accuracy.[72]

The implications for electoral integrity are profound. If voters cannot reliably distinguish authentic from synthetic content, and if corrective information consistently arrives too late to matter, then the informational basis for democratic decision-making erodes. Elections become contests over whose synthetic narratives achieve greater algorithmic amplification rather than over actual candidate positions or performance.

4.4 Language, Culture, and the Structural Gaps in Platform Governance

Language emerges as one of the most persistent sites of algorithmic failure, revealing how global platform architectures systematically marginalise non-dominant linguistic communities. This represents a governance gap with direct electoral consequences rather than merely a technical limitation. For instance, limited or non-contextual translation capabilities for African languages across digital platforms mean that users who do not speak such other languages are missing out on key political information and perspectives.

> **"We largely encourage local-language content because it is good for us as a continent as a whole to promote our own languages as part of the digital sphere and ecosystem. However, the question is how many people can actually access that information in local languages. That is also a challenge. You might find this especially in places like Uganda, which is highly diverse."**
>
> **– Tech Policy Specialist, Uganda**

Linguistic Inequities: Linguistic marginalisation operates in two directions simultaneously. First, political content produced in non-dominant languages receives less algorithmic distribution because platforms optimise for languages with larger user bases and greater commercial value. Second, moderation systems are less effective in these languages, allowing harmful content to circulate with minimal oversight.

The combined effect is that linguistic minorities experience both exclusion from mainstream political discourse and exposure to harmful content and unmoderated manipulation. Context, tone, and cultural reference shape meaning in ways that automated systems struggle to interpret. This is particularly consequential for political speech, which frequently employs irony, implication, and coded language.[73]

[72] McLoughlin, K. L., & Brady, W. J. (2024). Human-algorithm interactions help explain the spread of misinformation. Current opinion in psychology, 56, 101770.
[73] Gornostaeva, A. A. (2025). Irony in Political Communication: Discursive Practice, Strategy and Tactics. Вопросы современной лингвистики, (51), 6-16, who stressed the need for digital platforms to deliver deep contextual knowledge by onboarding more local staff and.

Content that appears neutral or humorous to automated moderation may carry inflammatory meaning within specific cultural contexts. The result is both over-moderation, where culturally appropriate speech is mistakenly flagged, and under-moderation, where harmful content evades detection because its meaning is context-dependent. Overall, automated systems used by social media platforms face inherent limitations in detecting culturally embedded meanings. The technical challenge of moderating linguistically diverse content was emphasised by experts, who stressed the need for digital platforms to deliver deep contextual knowledge by onboarding more local staff and training moderators to build effective moderation systems.

> **"You need to know the nuances… even within Yoruba, there are many variations… you need experts who understand these differences."**
>
> **– Technology Specialist, Nigeria**

> **"I think the best option is the development of more robust AI models trained by Africans, which can provide the appropriate nuance and context for translations"**
>
> **– CivicTech Founder, Nigeria**

This points to a fundamental mismatch between automated content moderation systems and linguistic diversity. Platforms rely on machine learning models trained primarily on dominant languages, where large datasets enable pattern recognition.[74] For languages with smaller digital footprints, these models perform poorly, failing to detect harmful content or incorrectly flagging benign conversations.[75]

Cultural Misalignment: Even within a single language like Yoruba, dialectical variation creates interpretation challenges that automated systems cannot navigate without extensive human expertise. Therefore, the challenge extends beyond non-dominant languages to include the interpretation of nuance even in widely spoken languages. For instance, experts drawn from across Africa detail how vernacular languages are often strategically weaponised during elections to evade moderation while maximising polarisation.

> **"Official election information is mostly in English, but local languages are used strategically to polarise ethnic groups during campaigns."**
>
> **– Journalist, Nigeria.**

> **"Local (vernacular) languages are sometimes tied to hate speech during elections."**
>
> **– Digital Rights Advocate, Zimbabwe**

[74] Xu, Y., Hu, L., Zhao, J., Qiu, Z., Xu, K., Ye, Y., & Gu, H. (2025). A survey on multilingual large language models: Corpora, alignment, and bias. Frontiers of Computer Science, 19(11), 1911362.
[75] Dehghani, M. (2024). A comprehensive cross-language framework for harmful content detection with the aid of sentiment analysis. arXiv preprint arXiv:2403.01270.

This strategic use of language creates an asymmetry where official electoral communication occurs in languages subject to greater scrutiny, while polarising messaging circulates in languages that platforms monitor less effectively. Political actors deliberately exploit this gap, using vernacular languages to make ethnically targeted appeals or spread misinformation that would be flagged if expressed in English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, or other mainstream languages. The consequence is that linguistic diversity, which should enrich democratic deliberation, becomes instead a vulnerability that undermines electoral integrity.[76]

Additionally, the algorithmic marginalisation of minority languages compounds exclusion. For instance, Tunisia's use of a different Arabic dialect (from other Middle Eastern Countries) limits reach and exposes the underrepresentation of minority languages.[77] When platforms prioritise standardised versions of major languages, speakers of dialects and minority languages face reduced visibility. Their political content reaches smaller audiences because algorithmic distribution favours linguistic homogeneity rather than because it lacks relevance. This creates political inequalities, as communities that speak marginalised languages have a diminished capacity to participate in national electoral discourse, even when using digital platforms.

Accountability Constraints: These failures are also embedded within broader accountability gaps in platform governance. Content moderation systems demonstrate persistent delays and inconsistencies, particularly in African contexts. For instance, actors report slow action by social media platforms when harmful or fake content is reported by their organisations, with platforms taking too long to remove it or sometimes not removing it at all. The delay between reporting harmful content and platform response creates windows during which misinformation circulates freely. In electoral contexts, where timing is critical, a delay of even hours can allow false claims to shape public perception before correction is possible. The inconsistency, where some reported content is removed while similar content remains elsewhere, suggests that moderation decisions are arbitrary or under-resourced rather than systematic. This undermines trust in platform governance and leaves civil society actors unsure whether reporting mechanisms are effective.

Data Opacity: Platforms retain data that could inform civil society oversight but fail to make it accessible. The opacity of platform data prevents independent verification of how algorithms function during elections. Civil society organisations, journalists, and researchers cannot assess whether content removal decisions are consistent, whether political advertising is targeted fairly, or whether misinformation spreads through algorithmic amplification or organic sharing. This informational asymmetry concentrates power in platform companies, which alone possess the data necessary to evaluate their own electoral impact. The opacity extends to political advertising and targeting, affecting electoral legitimacy.

> **"You have no idea who is behind the political message, why they are targeting this person... and this definitely affects how young people view these candidates."**
>
> **– Digital Rights Advocate, Uganda**

[76] Ngoboka, K. B., Tibategeza, E. R., & Kalokola, N. M. (2025). Linguistic Diversity in the Tanzanian 2020 General Elections: Experience from Nyamagana and Misungwi Districts. Communication and Linguistics Studies, 11(1), 31-41.
[77] Information obtained during focus group deliberations by two Tunisuan Digital Policy Experts, 2025

When voters cannot identify who is paying for political messages or why they are being targeted with specific content, they lack the information necessary to evaluate claims critically. Transparency about political advertising, who funds it, how audiences are targeted, and how much is spent, is a basic requirement for informed electoral participation.[78] The absence of this transparency on digital platforms means that voters make decisions based on messaging whose origins and motivations remain hidden, undermining the conditions for democratic accountability. An expert proposed an automated transparency mechanism that relies on both AI capabilities and human intervention.

> **"I think it's possible to some degree of accuracy, though I don't believe any of these tools will ever be 100% accurate. Twitter has rolled out Grok, which ostensibly does this to some extent."**
>
> **– CivicTech Founder, Nigeria**

African digital policy experts also recommend that platform owners publish comprehensive transparency reports detailing content takedowns, the reasons for them, and government requests during elections. The heightened demand for social media platform transparency reflects recognition that without public accountability mechanisms, platforms operate as unregulated arbiters of political speech. Transparency reports would create baseline conditions for oversight, enabling civil society to identify patterns, challenge decisions, and advocate for policy changes based on evidence rather than speculation, though they would not solve all governance problems.

Limited Investments in Africa: Platform owners' structural underinvestment in the African digital ecosystem was also explicitly acknowledged. This reflects a political economy of platform governance where resources follow commercial value.[79] African markets generate less advertising revenue than North American or European markets, leading platforms to allocate fewer resources to moderation, localisation, and oversight.[80] The result is that algorithmic harms are more pronounced and severe in Africa's electoral contexts, where platforms invest less, creating global inequalities in the quality of digital electoral environments.

4.5 Mediated Influence and the Erosion of Electoral Trust

Overall, our findings position social media algorithmic mechanisms at the centre of voter behaviour in Africa. Across three countries, Kenya, Namibia and Nigeria, the indelible link between social media algorithms, X, in this case, becomes obvious. To determine whether X algorithms indeed push feeds contrary to user needs, we measured the "Preferential Treatment" coefficient using a Negative Binomial Regression model to estimate algorithmic amplification factors, focusing on "News & Social Concerns" feeds, which are highly political. Across Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and Namibia, the X algorithm consistently rewards emotionally driven engagement over substantive civic content, creating structural barriers to high-quality public discourse.

[78] Schnakenberg, K. E., Schumock, C., & Turner, I. R. (2023). Dark money and voter learning. Available at SSRN 4461514.
[79] Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. New media & society, 20(11), 4275-4292.
[80] De Gregorio, G., & Stremlau, N. (2023). Inequalities and content moderation. Global Policy, 14(5), 870-879.

- In Kenya, posts containing specialised or in-depth political information experience a 46.8% reduction in reach (Topic Score coefficient = −0.631; IRR = 0.586), suggesting that informative content is initially suppressed by the platform. However, visibility increases by 34.4% when such content is framed with neutral sentiment (IRR=1.344). Engagement remains the dominant driver of reach: a 1% increase in user interaction more than doubles impressions (IRR=2.251). The result is a "virality trap" where emotionally resonant or neutrally framed posts outperform deeper civic analysis, discouraging substantive discourse.
- In Nigeria, the algorithm similarly prioritises rapid engagement while penalising informational depth. Informative or specialised posts face a 55.4% reduction in reach (IRR=0.446). While engagement boosts visibility significantly (IRR=2.160), the system also limits debate-driven political discourse. Political posts with critical sentiment see their reach fall by 32.3% (IRR=0.677). Consequently, posts that signal political identity or attract quick reactions tend to outperform nuanced analysis, narrowing the space for informed civic debate.
- In Namibia, X functions primarily as a popularity engine. High topic-depth posts experience a 53.6% drop in reach (IRR=0.464), effectively imposing a "substance tax" on specialised information. Meanwhile, engagement nearly doubles visibility for each incremental increase in interaction (IRR=1.979). Political classification and sentiment have little measurable effect, creating a "virality-or-nothing" environment where fast-moving political content dominates, and deeper analysis struggles to surface.
- In Uganda, the pattern is even more pronounced. High-depth content faces the steepest penalty in the region, with a 66.8% reduction in reach (IRR=0.332). Engagement again drives visibility, with a 1% increase in interactions producing a 2.5× boost in impressions (IRR=2.559). Political posts also face an initial 21.7% reduction in reach, indicating algorithmic caution toward political discourse. Although neutral sentiment improves visibility for general posts, the benefit is weaker for political content, further limiting the reach of civic discussions.

Overall, the four countries exceed the "High Inequality" threshold (> 0.45), indicating that a few topics or accounts dominate the algorithmic civic space. The Gini coefficients for Kenya (0.772), Nigeria (0.788), Namibia (0.786), and Uganda (0.786) reveal severe concentration of digital visibility, where the X algorithm functions as an attention monopoly, leaving the vast majority of users invisible. In the social media context, a Gini coefficient nearing 0.80 is an extreme indicator of inequality, suggesting that the top 1% of accounts likely capture over 80% of all impressions in these regions. Taken together, these patterns reveal a systemic algorithmic bias toward virality over informational value. Across markets, the platform's distribution logic tends to marginalise deep civic analysis while amplifying emotionally engaging or rapidly interactive content, shaping a digital environment where visibility is driven less by informational quality and more by engagement velocity.[81]

This data confirms that the algorithm does not serve the diverse information needs of the general population; instead, it aggressively funnels the collective attention of millions into a narrow pipeline of high-popularity or viral content. For users in these African markets, this translates to a "Winner-Takes-All" digital reality where localised, niche, or non-viral civic information is systematically buried under an avalanche of content from a tiny elite of high-engagement accounts

[81] Find extended country-level analysis on the annex

(most likely run by hired digital political operatives). This reality must have a pervasive effect on political opinion shaping and digital capture by certain political groups, thus crowding out other political voices and effectively influencing voter behaviour.

Algorithms impact offline activities massively

Our study also found that algorithmic influence does not operate solely through direct exposure but often travels through offline social structures, complicating the relationship between digital platforms and electoral outcomes. In rural and semi-connected communities, online misinformation gains power through individuals who hold social authority, particularly older generations who shape political interpretation for younger voters.

> **"The mis and disinformation that gets slung around on Facebook... really does have an effect on, especially, the older population... and they have a large influence on the younger population."**
>
> **– Internet Governance Policy Leader, Namibia**

This finding challenges assumptions that algorithmic influence requires universal platform access. Influence can be mediated, where a small number of connected individuals consume platform content and then transmit interpretations through offline networks. This creates a two-step flow of information in which algorithmic content shapes opinion leaders' views, which then influence community perception through face-to-face interaction, family discussions, and traditional authority structures.

The implication is that interventions focused solely on individual digital literacy are insufficient. Even if younger voters develop the critical skills to evaluate online content, they may still be influenced by older family members or community leaders whose views have been shaped by algorithmic exposure. Effective intervention requires understanding how digital and offline communication intersect, rather than treating them as separate domains.

First-time voters face a particularly serious risk from social media algorithms, yet they are a significant proportion of voters in Africa

First-time voters are particularly vulnerable to algorithmic manipulation due to limited political experience and their reliance on social media for electoral information. Without prior electoral experience to provide context, first-time voters lack reference points for evaluating claims. They are more likely to interpret algorithmic visibility as credibility, assuming that widely circulated content or highly followed accounts represent authoritative sources. This makes them susceptible to coordinated manipulation campaigns that exploit algorithmic amplification to manufacture the appearance of popular support or consensus.

> **"A lot of them are first-time voters... they're not focusing on issues, but rather who is saying what and who holds more power."**
>
> **– Tech Policy Specialist, Uganda**

Limited Digital and Media Literacy increases negative algorithmic impact, but is not final

Focus group participants confirmed that individuals with lower levels of media literacy are also particularly vulnerable. Digital experts observe that many less media-savvy voters are vulnerable to algorithm-driven persuasion. The term "media-savvy" refers to understanding how platforms operate, what incentives shape content production, and how algorithms mediate visibility, beyond mere technical skills. Voters who lack this meta-knowledge are more likely to take algorithmic feeds at face value, unaware that what they see has been shaped by engagement optimisation rather than journalistic curation or representative sampling.

The emotional dimension of algorithmic influence is particularly powerful

Social media algorithms heavily depend on emotional narratives that can easily sway voters, occasionally guiding them towards specific candidates or parties. Emotional appeals bypass rational thought, engaging identity, fear, or aspiration in ways that influence political preferences before conscious evaluation takes place. Algorithms boost emotional content because it drives engagement, creating conditions where electoral decisions are shaped more by emotional reactions than by policy analysis. This marks a shift from democratic ideals of informed, rational choice, although it may not necessarily be deliberate deception.

Messaging Apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram are Bastions of Packing Algorithmically Facilitated Content

Closed social messaging platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Telegram, were repeatedly identified as central to political manipulation, operating outside the limited transparency and moderation mechanisms of open platforms.

> **"WhatsApp is really where the real dirt matches happen."**
>
> – **Internet Governance Policy Leader, Namibia**

The connection between open and closed platforms represents a significant governance challenge. On open platforms like X or Facebook, harmful content is at least potentially visible to researchers, journalists, and civil society monitors who can document and challenge it. On WhatsApp, political messaging occurs in private groups and individual chats, making systematic monitoring impossible. This creates spaces where the most harmful electoral manipulation can occur with minimal risk of detection or accountability.

The harms produced in these closed spaces, such as reputational damage, intimidation, and narrative distortion, are difficult to trace, regulate, or counter. Victims of defamatory content on WhatsApp or Telegram often cannot identify its source or demonstrate its widespread circulation to warrant legal action. Civil society organisations cannot fact-check claims they cannot see. Platform companies claim to use end-to-end encryption, which prevents fact-checkers from moderating content, even when they are aware of harms.

The result is a governance vacuum where electoral manipulation flourishes precisely because it is

invisible. This opacity contributes to broader erosion of trust in both platforms and electoral institutions. Social media amplifies scepticism about democratic processes by providing spaces where conspiracy theories about electoral fraud circulate without challenge:

> **"Social media is contributing more to erosion of trust among citizens... by spotlighting gaps in electoral processes."**
>
> **– Tech Policy Specialist, Uganda**

Thus, the relationship between social media and electoral trust is significantly complex. Platforms can legitimately expose genuine problems with electoral administration, which serves democratic accountability. However, they also amplify unfounded suspicions and enable coordinated campaigns to delegitimise legitimate electoral outcomes. Distinguishing between these two dynamics is difficult for users, particularly when algorithmic amplification treats both legitimate critique and baseless conspiracy theories as equivalent forms of engagement.

African digital policy experts propose key strategies of selective trust and cautious sharing that users could rely on in response to pervasive manipulation, e.g., leveraging a few legitimate, verified accounts as news sources and cautious sharing of political content to limit propaganda risks. Additionally, as trust in broader platform content declines, users are also retreating to curated networks of accounts they deem credible. While this represents a form of adaptive scepticism, it also fragments the public sphere. When different users trust incompatible sets of sources, it becomes difficult to sustain a shared political reality. Elections presume that voters are deciding based on the same factual record, even if they interpret it differently. Algorithmic fragmentation undermines this presumption.[82]

The growing reliance on digital political message endorsements is also a result of users' cautious behaviour. The displacement of individual verification by social proof is evident in the widespread reliance on engagement metrics as proxies for credibility. This reflects a rational vantage point in which individuals lack the competence, time, and expertise to verify digital political claims independently, so they rely on social consensus as a signal of accuracy. However, algorithmic amplification makes engagement metrics unreliable proxies for truth. Coordinated campaigns can manufacture the appearance of consensus through bots, paid promotion, or synchronised sharing.[83] When users interpret these fabricated engagement signals as genuine popular agreement, they are misled by false social proof algorithmically generated to enhance credibility, beyond mere false content.

> **"This influence occurs through public endorsements of specific candidates and the effect those endorsements have on the opinions of others within one's social network.....This network effect makes such endorsements highly visible and influential on social media platforms."**
>
> **- CivicTech Founder, Nigeria**

[82] Iannelli, G., De Marzo, G., & Castellano, C. (2022). Filter bubble effect in the multistate voter model. Chaos: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Nonlinear Science, 32(4).
[83] Cinelli, M., Cresci, S., Quattrociocchi, W., Tesconi, M., & Zola, P. (2022). Coordinated inauthentic behavior and information spreading on Twitter. Decision Support Systems, 160, 113819.

5.

Why It Matters: Implications for Democracy and Electoral Integrity

5.1 Electoral Fairness and Informed Political Choice

Controversial Content Moves Faster than Credible Political Content: Social media algorithms across most platforms often privilege emotionally charged, polarising, or high-engagement content over policy-oriented information. This shifts voter attention away from substantive candidate evaluation toward signals like repetition, popularity, and virality.

> **"If a political actor insults someone, that message will be repeated many times. But when they explain policies or health plans, that part is buried."**
>
> **- Digital Rights Defender, Côte d'Ivoire**

Additionally, observers also state that most political information originates on X and is then disseminated across other platforms like TikTok and Facebook, raising questions around content authenticity. Consequently, actors observe that they occasionally avoid sharing content because of the difficulty of the source or the originator's agenda, for instance, whether it is paid for or propaganda material.

Non-critical content crowds out fact-based, policy-heavy conversations online: Once narratives gain traction, they are recycled across platforms, narrowing diversity and undermining informed political choice. Fact-based posts are often suppressed because they are not emotional or controversial enough. This phenomenon holds real democratic danger. For instance, in Tunisia, some electorates often make decisions based on what others share rather than deep research on candidates.[84]

> **"Social media is mostly used for slinging matches, not helping voters understand real political choices."**
>
> **- Digital Governance Specialist, Namibia**

5.2 Political Equality, Inclusion, and Voice

Algorithmic systems interact with pre-existing inequalities in language, literacy, gender, and digital access. While local languages and audio content increase participation for some, they also enable exclusionary political messaging. For instance, local languages can be used to hide information and promote hate speech. Additionally, marginalised communities and groups, e.g. women, PWDs and low-income households, also face even more severe exclusion. For instance, grassroots communities without smartphones or stable internet are already disadvantaged by the algorithm. Gender gaps in voter registration and representation further amplify these inequities.

[84] Pan African FGD deliberations, 2025

5.3 Sovereignty, Foreign Influence, and Platform Control

Online electoral conversations are sometimes shaped by cross-border narratives, and automated content over which African governments have limited oversight. For instance, digital operatives under the control of political parties/actors often influence voters subjectively. For instance, an evaluation of the impact of tweets in African elections found that 53% of key influencers on African polls were outside those specific countries, with 54% of these outside actors coming from outside Africa. Of the outside-Africa group, 33% came from the USA and 15% from the UK.[85]

In Angola 2 out of 5 media handles driving discourse on elections were non-domestic, while in Liberia's own influencers did not feature at all in the top ten influencers in their own elections while influencers based in Equatorial Guinea were 5th most influential on their own elections as well with actors based in the USA dominating 19.9% and Spain 15.7% digital influence on the country's polls.[86]

The use of Artificial intelligence in the generation of political messaging is also becoming rampant. When content is generated by artificial intelligence, it becomes very difficult to trace responsibility. Digital platforms also largely deprioritise African elections, while local actors adapt using informal infrastructures or coded communication, weakening national control over electoral information.

5.4 Long-Term Risks of Social Media Algorithms to Democratic Trust in Africa

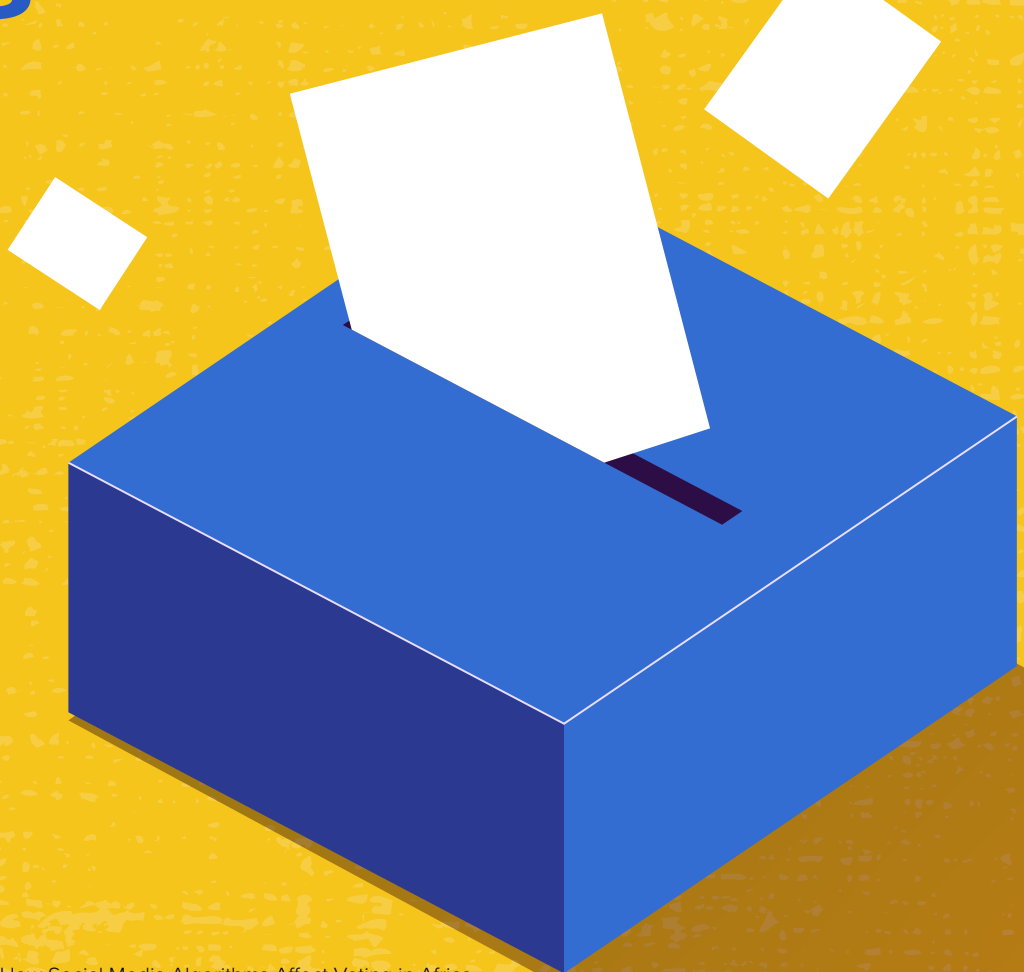
Exposure to misleading, unverifiable, or manipulated political messages erodes trust in institutions and can easily evolve into peer-network reliance, disinformation loops, and voter apathy, heightening post-election tension. Observers point out key critical threats, including:

- **Digital Political Operatives for Hire:** Political actors normally purchase digital influence, paying operatives to promote specific messages. These operatives frequently resort to all available means, including unethical interventions, to advance their candidate.
- **Candidate Washing:** This tactic involves digital operatives implanting a specific, often positive, image of a candidate in voters' minds. Over time, voters may discover that the 'clean' or 'competent' candidate they elected does not live up to the initial perception. Candidate washing is closely related to computational propaganda, in which operatives assemble social media, autonomous agents, algorithms, and big data to manipulate public opinion.[87] [88]
- **Algorithm-facilitated Disinformation:** This is where algorithms push a narrative suggesting that a candidate will win or lose an election. This can have negative implications, e.g. discourage potential supporters of the respective candidate being pushed as the loser or force the hands of undecided voters to vote for the one being pushed as the potential winner.[89]
- **Algorithm-facilitated Disinformation:** Even in cases where false messages are unintentional, they are still fanned by algorithms while corrections to such messages are circulated a lot more slowly, hence enabling unintended damage.

[85] Portlands. 2018. How Africa Tweets. Available **here**
[86] Portlands. 2018. How Africa Tweets. Available **here**
[87] Woolley, Samuel C., and Philip N. Howard (eds), Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media, Oxford Studies in Digital Politics (New York, 2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 22 Nov. 2018), Available **here**
[88] Spiller, L.D., Bergener, J. 2011. Branding the Candidate: Marketing Strategies to Win Your Vote. Available **here**
[88] López-López, P. C., Barredo-Ibáñez, D., & Jaráiz-Gulías, E. (2023). Research on Digital Political Communication: Electoral Campaigns, Disinformation, and Artificial Intelligence. Societies, 13(5), 126. Available **here**

6.

From Evidence to Action: Governing Algorithmic Power



6.1 Responsibilities of Governments and Electoral Management Bodies

Overall, African governments and electoral bodies remain reactive. Existing systems are either inadequate or ineffective in addressing complex algorithmic issues such as political microtargeting, AI-generated content, or digital campaign finance. Digital policy practitioners emphasise the need for updated laws, clear mandates, and technical capacity for monitoring digital electoral risks. Specific high-impact actions include:

- Reviewing legal and regulatory frameworks to address political micro-targeting.
- Greater involvement of electoral management bodies (EMBs) in digital awareness on election campaigns; electoral bodies mostly send procedural information, not political content.
- Governments should build legislative frameworks and functional capabilities to regulate AI use on social media effectively.
- Mandatory inclusion of trained social media monitors in the electoral process.
- Greater transparency and reporting on campaign spending per political party during election cycles, with clear categorisations of spending on social media, is also a fitting recommendation.
- Mandatory transparent campaign finance reporting, including clear disclosure of social media expenditures by political parties.

6.2 Obligations of Social Media Platforms

Most social media platforms fall short on moderation in local languages, transparency on political ads, and data access. Design interventions, fact-checks, labelling, and context metres can improve fairness without restricting expression.

- Integrating a fact-check button into viral political videos would provide content verification without limiting freedom of expression.
- Closely monitor messaging apps, e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram and Messenger. Experts note that the highest flow of fake videos and images occurs on these platforms during elections.
- Enhance the technical and contextual capabilities of internal fact-checking tools to capture the diverse languages and cultures across Africa, e.g., by hiring more local talent to train key fact-checking models and interpret contextual nuances.
- Prioritise the disclosure and publication of political ad spending and micro-targeting data to help users make political decisions.

6.3 Regional and Continental Governance Pathways

Due to the multifaceted nature of social media algorithms, national regulation alone is insufficient. Regional coordination can develop shared norms, pool expertise, and strengthen Africa's leverage with global platforms. Involvement by the African Union (AU), regional bodies (RBs), and regional economic communities (RECs) such as ECOWAS, EAC, SADC, and IGAD is key in fast-tracking AI and platform regulations in Africa.

6.4 Role of Civil Society, Media, and Independent Researchers

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), media, and researchers are core to mediating social media monitoring, awareness, and evidence generation, but are limited by platform access and uneven support. Awareness campaigns in local languages can address algorithmic bias, although many civil society actors in Africa, researchers and journalists remain locked out of platform data themselves.

6.5 Priority Policy Recommendations

African digital policy experts emphasise transparency, accountability, and capacity building and interventions that address structural failures rather than placing responsibility solely on individual users. Technological solutions were proposed to compensate for platform underinvestment in Africa; other critical levers include human-centric governance, local moderation, and disclosure requirements. Our study thus proposes key policy directions for addressing the impact of social media algorithms on voting in Africa, focusing on a mix of technological, regulatory, and human-centric approaches:

Technological and Content Governance Solutions:

- **Pragmatic use of AI in Moderation:** Given the unlikelihood of platforms significantly increasing human moderation, locally developed AI tools trained on relevant languages and contexts could help bridge content moderation and verification gaps. However, this approach requires careful design and human oversight to mitigate risks such as the inability to interpret nuance, susceptibility to manipulation, and lack of accountability.`
- **Integration of Culturally Competent Moderation:** Effective platform governance demands cultural expertise. Increasing awareness and intentional moderation in local languages is crucial. Moderators must understand local political context, linguistic nuance, and social dynamics. Platforms' reliance on automated systems and outsourced, context-unaware moderation leads to systemic failures that necessitate structural changes in how content governance is resourced.
- **Technological Inclusivity:** Integrating real-time, AI-driven translation tools into platforms could enhance accessibility across language barriers. Nevertheless, translation alone does not resolve the underlying issue of algorithmic prioritisation, which still favours dominant languages. Furthermore, these tools risk distorting political meaning due to challenges in contextual interpretation.

Regulatory and Transparency Measures:

- **Levelling the Playing Field in Political Advertising:** Regulatory interventions, for example capping or banning political ads on digital platforms, could reduce the financial advantage wealthy candidates and parties hold in algorithmic environments, where visibility is increasingly tied to financial resources. Implementing such restrictions, however, faces challenges across global platforms operating in diverse regulatory jurisdictions.

- **Enhanced Transparency:** Rebuilding trust requires transparency in political advertising, including clear disclosures by social media platform owners about who is paying for the ad. Additionally, political content should include explicit information about the intended audience.

Governance and Collaboration:

- Adoption of a Human-Centric Approach: A fundamental shift towards a human-centric model for digital governance is recommended. This places human security, data privacy and human agency at the heart of digital innovation.
- Deepened Collaboration: Ongoing engagement and collaboration between digital platforms and electoral bodies are essential. This includes capacity building for electoral bodies to understand platform campaign dynamics and emerging innovations.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Democratic Agency in the Algorithmic Age

Social media algorithms are transforming how voters participate in elections, how candidates compete, and how trust is built across Africa. However, without proper oversight, these platforms can exacerbate inequalities, undermine sovereignty, and threaten legitimacy. Although social media is generally beneficial for electoral campaigns, for example, by supporting policy discussions, particularly among young and emerging actors, and by providing spaces for diverse opinions that promote democracy and fairness, it also presents significant risks, such as compromising electoral integrity, enabling voter manipulation, and hindering democratisation. Social media algorithms, which control what viewers get to see, are the Achilles' heel; they influence political exposure whether users are aware of it or not.

Strategic Directions for Policy and Research

Long-term investments in public digital competence, regulatory reform, and independent research are essential. Algorithmic literacy and evidence-based policymaking are foundational. Social media users need awareness to counter the algorithm’s influence. Additionally, people first need to understand what an algorithm is. Public education and awareness on social media algorithms should be prioritised across all ages and voter groups.

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Glossary of Terms

Algorithm: The behind-the-scenes rules social media platforms use to decide which posts show up on your screen. They are usually designed to keep users clicking and scrolling.

Baseline: A normal, everyday starting point used for comparison. In this study, we used regular, non-political accounts as a "baseline" to see how much political content gets pushed to average users.

Coefficient: A number that shows how strongly two things are linked. A "negative" coefficient means that as one thing goes up, the other goes down (for example, the more factual a post is, the fewer views it gets).

Effective Visibility: A custom score showing how far a post actually spreads across the internet based on how political it is.

Engagement: A measure of how much people interact with a post, calculated by counting likes, shares, retweets, and comments.

Gini Coefficient: A score that measures inequality. In this report, a high Gini score means that a tiny handful of accounts are grabbing almost all the attention, leaving everyone else essentially invisible.

Impressions: The total number of times a post appears on people's screens, even if they just scroll right past it without reading.

IRR (Incidence Rate Ratio): A multiplier that shows how much a specific feature boosts or hurts a post's reach. For example, an IRR of 2 means a post gets twice as many views.

Mean Collection Latency: The average amount of time it takes for a post to go from being published to getting picked up by the algorithm and going viral.

Negative Binomial Regression: A statistical tool used to analyse numbers that vary wildly, like how most posts get 10 views, but a few get 100,000.

P-Value: A statistical measure showing how likely the observed results occurred by chance if there is no real effect. It ranges from 0 to 1, with p-values below 0.05 commonly considered statistically significant.

Political Score: A measure of how much political content is heavily stuffed into a user's everyday feed.

Sentiment Analysis: Using computers to read the mood or emotion of a post. For example, negative sentiment means the computer flagged the post as angry, critical, or fearful.

Topic Score: A measure of how deep, factual, or specialised a post is (as opposed to just being a quick, emotional reaction).

Zero-Shot Models: Smart AI tools that can instantly categorise text, like spotting whether a post is political or angry, without needing humans to teach them the difference first manually.

Annexes

Annex I: Supplementary Tables and Figures

Negative Binomial Regression: Factors Influencing Impressions in Kenya

Term	Estimate	Std Error	Statistic	P Value	CI Low	CI High	IRR
(Intercept)	6.203	0.086	71.78	0.000	6.024	6.384	494.061
log1p(engagement)	0.811	0.005	157.47	0.000	0.800	0.823	2.251
is_political Political	-0.534	0.061	-8.80	0.000	-0.653	-0.415	0.586
Topic Score	-0.631	0.078	-8.10	0.000	-0.789	-0.476	0.532
Neutral Sentiment	0.194	0.047	4.16	0.000	0.102	0.285	1.214
Negative Sentiment	0.110	0.044	2.48	0.013	0.022	0.195	1.116
is_political Political: Neutral Sentiment	0.296	0.069	4.29	0.000	0.160	0.431	1.344
is_political Political: Negative Sentiment	0.108	0.065	1.66	0.097	-0.020	0.235	1.114

Negative Binomial Regression: Factors Influencing Impressions in Nigeria

Term	Estimate	Std Error	Statistic	P Value	CI Low	CI High	IRR
(Intercept)	6.144	0.087	70.334	0.000	5.967	6.323	465.905
log1p(engagement)	0.770	0.004	176.284	0.000	0.761	0.779	2.160
is_political Political	0.056	0.065	0.863	0.388	-0.072	0.185	1.058
Topic Score	-0.808	0.085	-9.558	0.000	-0.982	-0.637	0.446
Neutral Sentiment	0.467	0.051	9.177	0.000	0.367	0.567	1.596
Negative Sentiment	0.344	0.049	7.040	0.000	0.247	0.439	1.411
is_political Political: Neutral Sentiment	-0.180	0.074	-2.433	0.015	-0.326	-0.035	0.835
is_political Political: Negative Sentiment	-0.390	0.071	-5.517	0.000	-0.529	-0.251	0.677

Negative Binomial Regression: Factors Influencing Impressions in Namibia

Term	Estimate	Std Error	Statistic	P Value	CI Low	CI High	IRR
(Intercept)	7.058	0.243	29.065	0.000	6.574	7.559	1162.614
log1p(engagement)	0.682	0.012	59.070	0.000	0.661	0.704	1.979
is_political Political	-0.060	0.174	-0.346	0.730	-0.401	0.283	0.942
Topic Score	-0.767	0.218	-3.515	0.000	-1.229	-0.323	0.464
Neutral Sentiment	0.275	0.135	2.029	0.042	0.003	0.535	1.316
Negative Sentiment	0.113	0.127	0.885	0.376	-0.144	0.354	1.119
is_political Political: Neutral Sentiment	0.107	0.195	0.549	0.583	-0.278	0.489	1.113
is_political Political: Negative Sentiment	-0.021	0.183	-0.116	0.908	-0.383	0.338	0.979

Negative Binomial Regression: Factors Influencing Impressions in Uganda

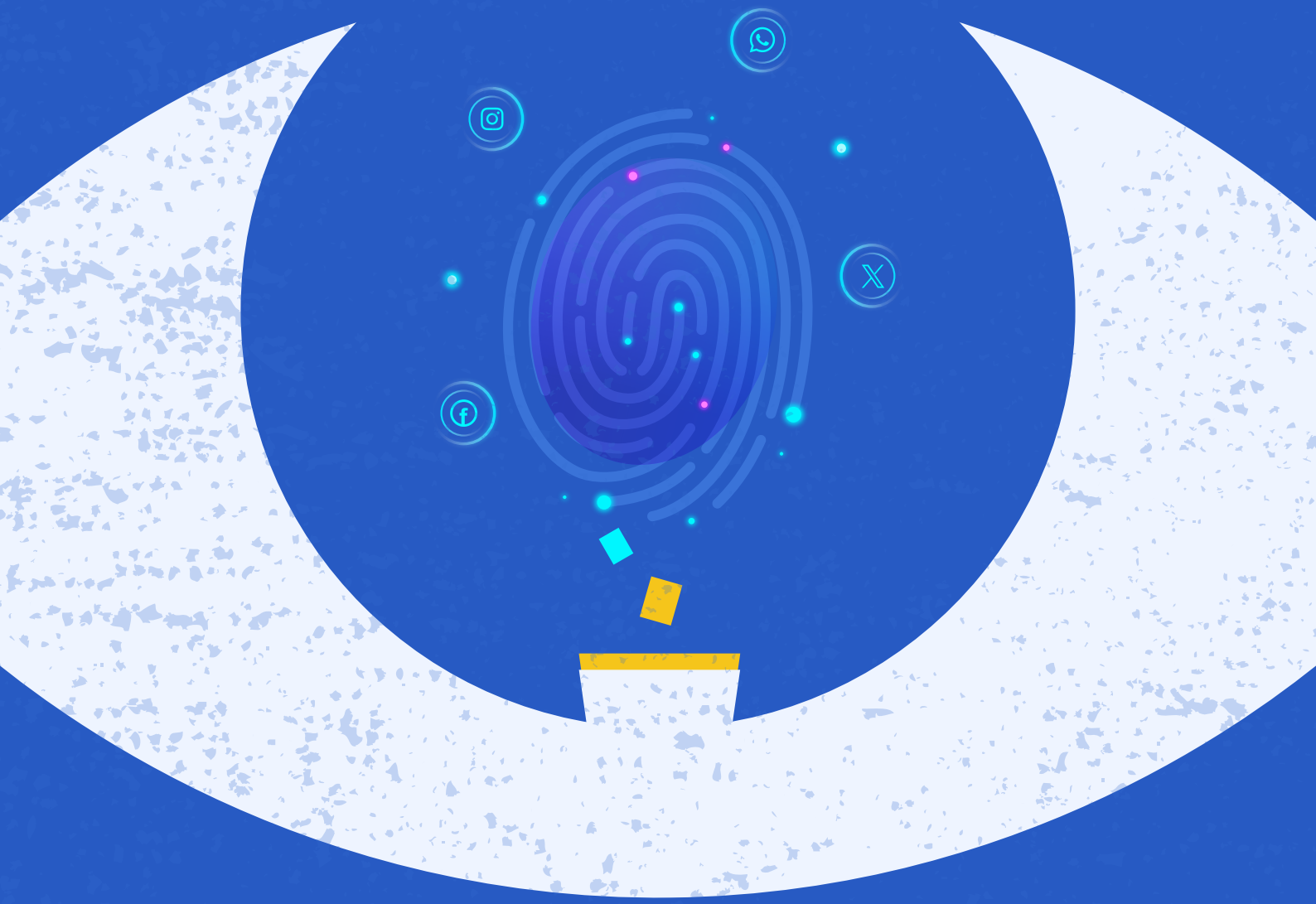
Term	Estimate	Std Error	Statistic	P Value	CI Low	CI High	IRR
(Intercept)	5.115	0.110	46.645	0.000	4.891	5.343	166.547
log1p(engagement)	0.939	0.006	146.723	0.000	0.925	0.954	2.559
is_political Political	-0.245	0.076	-3.227	0.001	-0.393	-0.095	0.783
Topic Score	-1.101	0.104	-10.552	0.000	-1.320	-0.886	0.332
Neutral Sentiment	0.345	0.057	6.040	0.000	0.232	0.455	1.411
Negative Sentiment	0.122	0.055	2.202	0.028	0.012	0.229	1.130
is_political Political: Neutral Sentiment	-0.182	0.086	-2.107	0.035	-0.351	-0.013	0.834
is_political Political: Negative Sentiment	-0.003	0.082	-0.039	0.969	-0.165	0.158	0.997

Special Note: The negative binomial regression model is specified as:

$$\log(\mu) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \log(1+\text{Engagement}) + \beta_2 \text{Political} + \beta_3 \text{TopicScore} + \beta_4 \text{Sentiment} + \beta_5 (\text{Political} \times \text{Sentiment}) + E$$

Where:

- μ is the expected number of Impressions.
- Political is a dummy variable (1 for Political, 0 otherwise).
- β_5 represents the interaction effect, capturing how the “Political Tax” shifts based on post sentiment.



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