

## Social media, platform power and (mis)information in Zambia's recent elections

In this series of three articles, LSE's Wendy Willems examines the role of digital technology and social media in Zambia's recent elections. She situates this within the broader context of the African continent where both governments and mobile phone operators face a growing number of economic and political dilemmas in relation to the rise of social media.

*Open-source, purpose-built digital platforms such as Ushahidi and Uchaguzi have been used to monitor a number of African elections. However, with the growing power of corporate social media platforms on the continent, Facebook and Twitter are emerging as important sources of information on election-related incidents. Based on her recent fieldwork, LSE's Wendy Willems examines the challenges of the intensive circulation of information during the recent Zambian elections held on August 11.*

In early 2011, global media reports began celebrating the role of social media in mobilising protests and enabling political change in North Africa. Subsequently, this provoked a **lively debate** on the impact of Twitter and Facebook, with many commentators gradually adopting a more sceptical view of the revolutionary attributes of social media. In the wake of the so-called 'Arab Spring', **international donors** too became enthused about the potential of digital technology in promoting 'democracy' and 'good governance' in other parts of the African continent. The World Bank's most recent World Development Report 2016 entitled '**Digital Dividends**' acknowledges the potential role of social media in processes of development.

With the assistance of open-source, purpose-built digital platforms such as **Ushahidi** and **Uchaguzi**, ambitious projects have been launched across the continent to enable civil society organisations to collect information via SMS and monitor recent elections in Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. **Open data** are increasingly being celebrated as key to improved government accountability and transparency in Africa. Digital tools such as Kenya's **#GotToVote** website enabled citizens to find their nearest voter registration centre, to spread messages of peace on election day and to receive elections results on their phone. In Burkina Faso, a mobile application run by **the Burkina Open Data Initiative (BODI)** enabled citizens to receive real-time election results in the country's November 2015 elections.

As in other African countries, civil society organisations in Zambia made extensive use of mobile phones in their attempts to monitor the recent elections held on August 11. Along the lines of other donor-funded citizen monitoring projects in the region, the **Zambia Elections Information Centre (ZEIC)** used an online platform to generate (and verify and disseminate) information on any election-related incidents from local monitors and citizens via SMS or WhatsApp. However, with the growing popularity of social media, ZEIC did not just rely on information submitted by monitors and citizens to its own

platform but also began to monitor Facebook and Twitter streams for any relevant information on incidents.



Corporate social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp (and **Twitter** in certain countries such as Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa) are fast gaining ground on the continent. The number of Facebook users in Africa was estimated at **124.6 million** at the end of 2015 and **continues to grow**. South Africa is one of **WhatsApp's** biggest markets. New market entrants such as China's mobile messaging platform WeChat are **intensifying the competition** between different digital platforms on the continent.

The political implications of what my LSE colleague, **Professor Robin Mansell**, refers to as **platform power** are becoming more evident on the continent, as demonstrated by the role of different social media platforms in recent elections in **Nigeria** and **Tanzania**. This has not gone unnoticed with governments in **Burundi, Chad, Congo, and Uganda** and **Zimbabwe** which recently ordered mobile operators to block access to social media during periods of elections or protests, frequently citing concerns over national security.

Social media platforms – primarily Facebook, WhatsApp and to a lesser extent Twitter – also played an important role in circulating information during the recent **Zambian** elections. For many voters, social media were crucial sources of news in the run-up to the elections. When demand for real-time information was high, Facebook and WhatsApp became ideally placed to fill a gap, particularly in a context where information supply is low as a result of **constraints on press freedom** and freedom of expression, the high costs of newspapers or an absence of continuous 24-hour media coverage on local radio and television channels.



Election campaign posters in Lusaka, Zambia Photo Credit: Wendy Willems

Because of the growing affordability of both smartphones and mobile data (partially due to subsidised access to social media via 'data bundles'), popular online publications such as [Mwebantu](#), [Zambia Reports](#), [Zambian Watchdog](#), [Tumfweko](#) and [Open Zambia](#) provided Zambians with frequent news updates on their Facebook pages throughout the election period. Apart from Facebook, the Twitter hashtag #ZambiaDecides and WhatsApp groups of friends, relatives or colleagues also intensified the circulation of election-related information.

Particularly after election day, these platforms became crucial for voters to get real-time updates while they eagerly awaited the election results which eventually took four days to arrive and provoked much anxiety. The quality of information on social media was, however, often questionable and frequently challenged not only by the [Electoral Commission of Zambia \(ECZ\)](#) and [observer missions](#) but also by citizens themselves. Having been exposed to a polarised broadcasting and print media climate for some time, Zambian audiences have become accustomed to critically compare news accounts with each other and not to rely on a single source of information.

Information scarcity after elections is certainly not helpful but a relative abundance of low-quality information does not necessarily improve the situation. However, the prevalence of rumours should not be used as a pretext for government shutdowns of social media. Even with a solid supply of verified information on election-related incidents, it is by no means guaranteed that the state will respond to any concerns about voting irregularities. This ultimately demonstrates the limitations of a blind faith in technology, crowdsourcing and information-based approaches.

**Read the [second](#) and [third](#) article in this series.**

**Dr Wendy Willems** is Assistant Professor in the LSE Department of Media and Communications. She recently carried out fieldwork on the economic and political implications of the mobile internet in Zambia as part of a collaborative project on [New Media Practices in a Changing Africa](#) funded by the Norwegian Research Council. Follow her on Twitter [@WendyWillems.\\_](#)

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