

Abstract

The study investigated the role of social media in youth political participation and its impact under stringent regulations by the Uganda government. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter are part of youth lifestyle in Uganda. These platforms started as youth social networks for entertainment and economic transactions but later spilled over to politics where youth use them for sharing political information, mobilisation, influencing public opinion and opening new political spaces. Due to the proliferation of social media and its impact on politics world-wide the Ugandan government opted to use legal frameworks and policies such as Computer Misuse Act 2011 and social media tax to control political dissent. When the Ugandan government introduced social media tax on the pretext of increasing the tax base, the youth resorted to virtual private networks to maintain links in political participation. The study is anchored on the theory of public sphere which focuses on the use of social media to form virtual spaces where youth can debate and form public opinion to influence political choices of their leaders. The study used mixed methods where a survey was conducted among National Youth Council leaders at the subcounty, and division as well as guild leaders of four universities. The focus group discussions involved youth and students while in-depth interviews involved youth leaders, guild leaders, policy makers and bureaucrats. The findings show that social media has the potential to form and maintain virtual communities of youth in Uganda to participate in politics and, more importantly, it has reignited youth interest in political participation. The findings also show that the Ugandan government, to a large extent, does not conform to international norms in social media regulation, since it uses legal frameworks to stifle political dissent. These findings therefore imply that countries with less conformity to international norms in social media regulation may stifle youth political participation and deliberative democracy in the digital era. The government therefore should embrace social media platforms by appreciating their role in achieving democratic political space in a digital era.