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## **Social Media and Political Communication: Assessment of the news media usage during elections in Kenya**

Social media have opened up spaces for political actors to engage with voters in more direct ways compared to traditional forms of campaigns such as rallies, billboard advertising, and the legacy media. It has enhanced the flow of information between candidates and voters, provided a forum for a free exchange of ideas, and unconstrained by imbalances of power and resources. Social media reach is greatest among younger voters, who are attracted to new forms of communication for social interaction and personal gratification. Political actors can reach these young voters to encourage them to register as voters or discuss election campaigns/agendas with them. Kenya has an internet penetration of 90%, over 8 million social media users and over 80% of Kenyans visit platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp (CAK, 2020). Digital connectivity and interactivity in Kenya has enhanced political knowledge and political information. Political actors have leveraged the power of social media to gain visibility.

However, social media has also been used as avenues for propaganda, fake news, incitement to violence, hate speech or advocacy of hatred. A case in point is the Cambridge Analytica who were accused of manipulating voters and running negative campaigns. Many have also been cyberbullied by Kenyans on Twitter (#KOT), through toxic politics and low quality political debates. President Kenyatta was hounded out off Twitter and Facebook by #KOT. There are many instances where political messaging has veered into unethical or potentially criminal conduct. This has potentially undermined freedom of expression and calls for reviewing existing regulation so that online spaces are safer for political candidates and voters alike. This papers therefore seeks to analyze how social media was used during elections, examine the role of social media in creating political discourse, and analyze the emergence of citizen journalism as an alternative medium of communication

**Primary authors:** Ms JEPKURUI, Sheila (Kabarak University); Ms SANKEI, Seema (Kabarak University)

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