1

WhatsApp and political messaging at the periphery: Insights from northern Ghana

Gabrielle Lynch, Ghadafi Saibu and Elena Gadjanova

With relatively cheap smartphones available across the country; time-limited data bundles and schemes such as Facebook's Free Basics (which provide unlimited or free access to various social media platforms);[1] 'cultural values of sociality, interconnectedness, interdependence and conviviality';[2] and a widespread popular interest in current affairs,[3] it is unsurprising that an increasing number of Ghanaians are active social media users.[4] This includes the country's political aspirants and party activists who – in an extremely competitive electoral system that sees regular transfers of power between the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP) – are always looking for a competitive edge. In 2016, the NPP seemed to gain this edge, at least in part, through their more effective use of social media. As the incumbent president and NDC flagbearer, John Mahama, lamented in the wake of his defeat:

> Social media was coming into its own … and the NPP used it very effectively to really create the perception – exaggerated – of our administration that the economy was in a big mess.[5]

Or as one NPP official claimed, 'we used [social media] extensively [in 2016] and it contributed about 40 per cent to our victory.'[6] This common

Gabrielle Lynch is Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Warwick. Ghadafi Saibu is Junior Fellow at the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies and a PhD Candidate at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. Elena Gadjanova is Assistant Professor in Politics at the University of Exeter.

evaluation led both parties to invest even more heavily in social media ahead of the country's 2020 elections.

But how is this increased use of social media helping to shape electoral campaigns and party politics? It is evident from recent studies that social media has not replaced traditional campaign activities: politics in Ghana remains ground-intensive and politicians need to remain visible and to display their electoral viability, track record, and commitment to constituents to be competitive.[7] In this context, an investment in social media constitutes additional work that enables candidates and parties to conduct limited fund-raising, to better organize their activities – from the scheduling of rallies to voter registration drives and monitoring of polling stations, to sharing messages and propaganda with potential voters; and to strategize on, and manage, their campaign messages and propaganda through intra-party groups.[8] In this chapter, we focus not only on the sharing of messages with voters but also on the organization and control of campaign messaging by parties. The latter is an issue that has received relatively little attention despite widespread concern with 'fake news' and the fact that (dis)information campaigns in other contexts have often involved surprisingly 'professionalised and institutionalised work structures'.[9]

The chapter draws upon primary research conducted in 2019, and focuses in particular on the use of WhatsApp by NPP and NDC officials in four constituencies in northern Ghana – Tamale Central, Tamale North, Tamale South, and Nanton (see Figure 1). In terms of primary research, we conducted sixty-five qualitative interviews and eight focus group discussions (FGDs) with politicians, campaign strategists, political communicators, political activists, youth group members, journalists and civil society workers between February and July 2019 in Ghana's capital city, Accra, and in and around Tamale in northern Ghana as part of a larger project on social media and political mobilization in the 2016 and 2020 elections. We also designed a survey, which IPSOS-Ghana then conducted with a representative sample of 1,600 respondents across the four constituencies in July 2019.

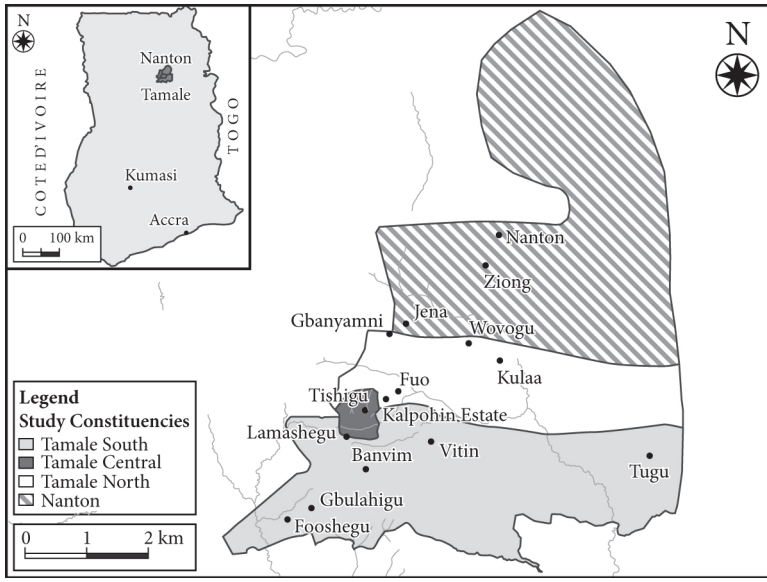

Figure 1 The four study constituencies in northern Ghana. Compiled by Issahaka Fuseini.

Tamale and its environs were selected for several reasons. First, as an area in which both the NPP and NDC secure national seats[10] and a significant share of the presidential vote,[11] the setting allowed us to look at how social media is used by the dominant parties in a competitive environment. Second, as an area that has historically been socio-economically and politically marginal, and which is physically far from Accra, it allowed us to look at how party messaging spreads from the political centre to the periphery. Finally, as an area that includes both the country's third largest city and remote and relatively poor rural areas, it allowed us to look – within a relatively small geographic area – at how social media is used to disseminate, but also discuss, organize, and control messages in areas where a majority of the local population are regular and direct social media users (as in Tamale municipality), as well as in areas where only a minority are (as in rural Nanton). Our

focus in this chapter is thus on messaging at the periphery, rather than at the national level or political centre.[12]

WhatsApp, unlike largely open platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, is particularly well suited for intra-party organization and mass mobilization. As a closed platform that allows for encrypted conversations within administrated groups of up to 256 people – and in a context largely free of reports of spyware hacking of the platform – WhatsApp is the preferred media for intra-party organization and discussion. At the same time, WhatsApp's functionality, which allows people to share and forward texts, voice recordings, memes and weblinks – as well as users' ability to easily access messages whenever they go online – means that it is now a more popular communication application than Facebook or other social media platforms.[13] Not only is WhatsApp popular, but it is common for Ghanaians to belong to multiple (often large) WhatsApp groups, which means that, even at the periphery, activists and candidates can discuss, strategize and organize within intra-party groups, and then use their membership of other groups to disseminate messages. Those messages are then also shared – by activists and supporters alike – across various social media platforms and offline.

This chapter starts with a brief overview of the structures that parties and candidates have developed to organize their messaging via WhatsApp before turning to how messaging is managed in practice and with what impact in terms of the types of (mis)information disseminated. What we find is that the institutionalized and highly competitive nature of Ghana's political parties, and the heavy reliance of ordinary citizens on politicized networks for access to jobs and other opportunities, have facilitated an impressive social media communications structure – with WhatsApp used to connect NPP and NDC party leaders and office holders in Accra with those at the regional, constituency and ward levels, even in the most remote and rural parts of the country. This structure is then paralleled and reinforced by local-level networks established by incumbent and aspirant MPs and assembly members, and by more informal networks. These structures

allow for the incredibly quick and efficient relay of information; group members are also used to discuss party and candidate messaging in ways that allow for both top-down directives and bottom-up input. We find that this messaging is then monitored by group administrators and prominent members in ways that encourage communicators to stick to a party-line. This line includes both positive campaigns and 'decampaigns', or efforts to persuade voters to reject alternative candidates; but simultaneously discourages disinformation that could be easily debunked or might otherwise put off potential or existing supporters, such as content likely to increase ethnic divisions or incite violence. In Ghana this helps to moderate some of social media's more divisive and polarizing tendencies. In short, WhatsApp is having a significant impact on campaign messaging in Ghana, but in ways that ultimately feed off, and further reinforce, pre-existing structures and strategies.

Party machines and cyber battalions

Ghana's politics is dominated by the NPP and NDC: the two secured every parliamentary seat in 2016, all but one in 2020, and over 98 per cent of the presidential vote in both elections. The NDC and NPP are popularly associated with distinct ideological visions, connected to the parties' Nkrumahist or Danquah/Busia roots. The NPP self-identifies, and is widely associated, with an intellectual, business and professional elite dedicated to liberal governance and a market economy; and the NDC with social democratic appeals and more rural and marginalized communities. With time this distinction has become increasingly blurred with both parties offering increasingly similar manifesto pledges as they move to the middle of the political spectrum.[14] This has gone hand-in-hand with both parties making inroads into each other's support bases as is evident in northern Ghana where the NDC was initially dominant, but where the NPP now regularly wins parliamentary seats and a significant proportion of the presidential vote.[15]

The inroads that both parties have made into each other's strongholds are further evidenced in the development of sophisticated and extensive party structures that connect the political centre with regional, constituency and ward committees across the country. These structures are reinforced by individual candidate networks and by more informal groups of supporters, such as those who gather at party-branded 'sheds'.[16] This impressive level of activity and reach is rendered possible by strong socialized attachments with particular parties (through family, friends and clubs), cross-ethnic campaigns and regular transfers of power, while many also hope to gain from their activism via immediate handouts or future socio-economic and political opportunities.[17]

By 2019, both the NPP and NDC had integrated WhatsApp into these formal structures and informal networks. This included the appointment or election of communications officers at every level of the party structure; with those officials then connected with each other through intra-party WhatsApp groups. As one NPP member explained:

> The regional national communication director he has programmed a WhatsApp group. So, that the various regional communication directors are part of that particular WhatsApp group. When there is information or when the party has come up with some certain offer of information, the national communication director has to put it on that platform. The various regional directors will then put it in their various regional communication platform … [and] their constituency communication team … [and] the electoral area communicators will then copy the message and send to various electoral areas. That's how the message is being channelled.[18]

These party structures were paralleled and reinforced by those established by aspirant and incumbent politicians, and by an 'army' of social media communicators. The latter included those on allowances, of as little as GH₵20 (US$3.50) a week for data, who were key members of intra-party and candidate WhatsApp groups, as well as those who hoped to come to the attention of party officials and candidates through their public activism and – in so doing – either be recruited as a paid

online communicator themselves or to benefit in some other way in the short- to medium-term.[19] Moreover, while many of these aspirant communicators were linked to intra-party or candidate WhatsApp groups only indirectly through friends and associates, others were already members having been recognized by group administrators as active supporters.

Finally, there were ordinary supporters and party members who – for various reasons – often engaged in political mobilization of their own. As one interviewee explained of an NDC parliamentary candidate's campaign in 2016:

> We had a group, [an] old students association group, and he found a way of getting into that group on WhatsApp. And then he was able to tell us his aims and what he would do for our communities should he be given the vote. And through that we, those who were in the communities with our people … we were doing the campaign for him.[20]

These formal party and candidate structures and informal networks pervaded across northern Ghana, extending into the poorest neighbourhoods and remotest villages. Intra-party and candidate WhatsApp group members were then proactive in sharing party messages both online and offline.

First, WhatsApp messages relayed via intra-party or candidate groups were forwarded through the multiple WhatsApp groups that characterize everyday Ghanaian life. As one interviewee explained:

> In this country usually you have WhatsApp groups. In every constituency you'll have WhatsApp groups that have more women in … like a market women's group … Some that will be more youth maybe like a motor bike taxi association; some that will be more students [like] some university platform; or some that will be older, maybe a teacher's group.[21]

Party officials and activists proactively sought to join these groups so as to use their membership to share campaign messages and propaganda: 'You find a lot of people using WhatsApp. They have WhatsApp groups. One message is sent out and then it's copied over, and sent all

across. Before you know it, a lot of the groups have that information.'[22] These messages were shared in various forms – including text, memes, voice notes and videos – and languages, depending on the message and target group.

Second, messages received on WhatsApp were regularly shared through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter with attention given to the comparative advantages of each platform. As one interviewee explained, 'Facebook allows you to go back and edit. WhatsApp doesn't.' As a result, long write-ups are on Facebook, while 'short clip messages are on WhatsApp because … you can read it before and then you send it'.[23]

Third, intra-party and candidate WhatsApp groups helped to inform traditional media content: as journalists and presenters used social media to source and fact-check stories,[24] and as group members appeared on, or phoned into, increasingly ubiquitous radio talk shows.[25] This dissemination was encouraged by parties and candidates. National party communicators, for example, prepared 'speaking points', which they then shared 'among a group of communicators across the entire country', such that, if a member 'appear[ed] on radio, these are the issues that you are speaking on'.[26]

Finally, intra-party WhatsApp messages were shared by politicians, activists and supporters through the rallies, door-to-door canvassing, and community events (such as funerals and school meetings) that characterize Ghana's extended campaigns,[27] and through 'pavement radio'. As group members discussed WhatsApp conversations through the 'popular and unofficial discussion of current affairs' in marketplaces, places of worship, bars and the like.[28] These offline communications were critical as it meant that messages initially shared via intra-party and candidate WhatsApp groups were systematically passed on to ordinary citizens including those without direct social media access.

The number of people involved in this dissemination of information was rendered possible – and further reinforced – by already well-established party structures. As a result, it was perhaps unsurprising

that smaller political parties were unable to compete with the well-oiled NPP and NDC machines.

> The limited resources of the smaller opposition parties mean that they cannot invest in communications teams or 'social media armies' to the same extent, nor can they generate the same level of voluntary engagement through digital entrepreneurs … [as a result] the messages of the smaller parties get drowned out by the large and increasingly well-organised social media machines and the armies of hopeful volunteers of the big two.[29]

The way that WhatsApp was used by political parties and candidates to relay information down a chain of command into all walks of life was striking. However, just as striking, was the extent to which WhatsApp was being used to discuss, strategize, monitor and control messaging.

Discussing, and holding, the party line

In Ghana's 2020 election, WhatsApp and social media platforms were largely used to share information, rather than to engage in more interactive discussions.[30] This finding is in keeping with studies in other contexts that have found that citizens are largely 'campaigned *at*, but not *with*'; with online efforts tending 'to avoid the full interactive affordances of digital media'.[31] Yet, this does not mean that information was pre-determined or that it flowed in only one direction. On the contrary, intra-party WhatsApp groups were used to pass information not only down or across, but also up, and to discuss and monitor information strategies.

The channelling of information from the bottom-up was recognized as important as it helped to ensure that officials and candidates were aware of pertinent talking points that would resonate with different groups and communities. As one NPP communicator explained:

> We are with the community. we know what is going on there about the economy. So, we also give them [our national leaders] information about the current situation on the ground.[32]

Such feedback was encouraged by party leaders and strategists, and could be almost instantaneous:

> Most of them [the party leaders], they usually give us 'oh tomorrow by this time I will be on radio station. This are the topics that we will be going through.' We will also bring our ideas, and on the groups so that we also share it … as the panel are seated … we also sometimes give them ideas by WhatsApp. The host may throw up some question whereby … you will have a better idea of it than the panellist, then you also just WhatsApp him the answer.[33]

Yet more striking still was the amount of discussion within these intra-party and candidate groups about the campaign line. As one NDC communicator explained:

> We have political groups on WhatsApp where we meet together to have internal political discussions among ourselves before we come out to engage in debate with our political opponents.[34]

An NPP communicator confirmed how,

> we collectively examine the post together, if there is nothing wrong with it, it is approved for public sharing, but if there is a problem it is either edited or dropped.[35]

Not only were party messages discussed via these intra-party WhatsApp groups, but these groups – often through the group administrator – were used to monitor and manage the same:

> Each and every WhatsApp group you have an administrator or someone who manage[s] the WhatsApp group. Who direct[s] you what to do and what not to do.[36]

This oversight was impressive in its efficiency and reach. As one constituency-level NPP communications officer explained in rural Nanton:

> When you write something, it goes through the constituency director before it [is] posted … If the constituency communication director assesses it and sees it [is] not suitable to go public he will advise that it should be dropped. And even if he doesn't see it before you post it,

> some members of the regional communications team might still see it. They will inform him that 'we have seen this post from a member of your team in the constituency, so work on it'. He will then call you and talk to you about it. When you talk, it is possible you might delete the post or edit it … Even if a party member who is not in the communication team … posts something about the party which is not suitable to be on social media, and the regional or the national teams see it, the communication directors will try to locate the person to verify the authenticity, and to advise the person on either to delete or edit it. So, it is the constituency, regional and the national directors who monitor social media for the political parties in our politics.[37]

The same was true for the NDC:

> When a member says something, which is overboard, he [the communications director] will draw your attention to it and advise you how to put it better next time. These regulations are on all the platforms. Everything that goes on the platform he is aware of it.[38]

Interestingly, both parties sought to use this oversight to encourage creative messaging that was more likely to resonate with particular groups and areas. As one NDC communicator explained:

> We have a WhatsApp group for ourselves where we all meet and discuss issues … that one is restricted … [however] because we usually don't want the information to look contrived, like it has been deliberately said … [we say] you go out there, you use own words, you use your own strategy, the best strategy you think can reach your audience well … once you get the central idea about what you are doing, you can in any way project it, as far as it arrives at the same thing.[39]

This approach encouraged creativity – from ensuring that critiques appeared to come from ordinary citizens so that they looked 'simply socially critical' rather than overtly partisan[40] to discussions about the pictures most likely to give a story 'more traction',[41] and use of different formats (texts, memes, recorded voice notes) and language.

Not only were these groups highly strategic in their approach, but sanctions were imposed on those who transgressed the rules or shared

information deemed to be damaging to the party or candidate's efforts. As one party activist explained:

> There are rules that you need to go by, so if we find out that [someone has broken those rules], we normally issue a warning to them before exiting them. I personally sometime call them, 'ohh, this person, what you are putting on the platform is not acceptable so you better stop or avoid it'.[42]

With sanctions also used against those who were regarded as insufficiently loyal, or as a potential 'spy' for another political party or candidate. This oversight even extended into the more rural and remote areas of Nanton:

> There are always rules and regulations governing the group. So, there are sanctions for those who violate the rules. Some of the sanctions are either the person is temporarily or permanently banned from the group. If it is WhatsApp for example, he is [sometimes] excluded from the group for some months, weeks before he is reconnected to the group.[43]

This level of organization and oversight is significant in and of itself, but it also meant that campaign messaging by party officials, social media 'armies', and ordinary supporters were more controlled than they might at first appear, with important implications for the type of messaging that was both encouraged and sanctioned.

WhatsApp and the messaging dis/encouraged

In multiparty Ghana, campaign messaging has tended to focus on persuading voters that a particular candidate and party is viable, that they are generous and able to assist, and that they are well placed to promote public goods such as social service provision, economic development and security. This messaging has gone hand-in-hand with 'decampaigns' or with efforts to persuade voters to reject alternative candidates. This multipronged approach

is evident in the emphasis commonly placed on a track record of assistance and ability to protect and promote local and national interests, and in the often very personalized attacks on opponents as corrupt, ethnically biased or otherwise morally reprehensible.[44] The increased use of WhatsApp has not fundamentally altered such messaging with important implications for the kinds of information shared and discouraged.

At one level, politicians and their supporters were using 'social media to signal status through interactions with constituents and influential figures' and to 'showcase development activities'.[45] To this end, endorsements by popular or prominent figures were widely shared; characteristics widely regarded as virtuous – such as religious adherence, peace promotion and national pride – were proudly advertised; donations and other forms of local assistance and development support were documented and relayed through pictures and videos; and allegations of wrongdoing were publicly denied.

At another level, the same individuals were using social media to share fake news and negative stories that cast their opponents in a negative light. As one interviewee explained, if 'you are a social media communicator, you have to promote the bad thing to condemn [your opponent's] party. That is the work of the social communicator.'[46] Or, as former president Mahama complained after his defeat in 2016, the NPP 'used a lot of propaganda on social media to tar us with the brush of corruption, incompetence, and telling a lot of tales'.[47]

This common strategy of decampaigning encourages the spread of personalized attacks and fake news, which has become an issue of widespread concern. For example, the Media Foundation for West Africa found that 'more than half of the 98 claims by 2016 electoral campaign participants that it fact-checked were completely false, half-truths, or misleading'.[48] At the same time however, the fact that opponents are constantly looking for ways to decampaign each other helped to curb some of the more dangerous and divisive forms of fake news and propaganda, which could easily prove counter-productive in a context in which both parties need to mobilize support across

ethnic, religious, gender and socio-economic lines, and in which there is widespread fear that elections will turn violent and pride in the country's status as the continent's beacon of democracy.[49]

Messaging that was clearly discouraged for these reasons included outright lies that could be relatively easily debunked. As one NDC activist explained:

> When you are campaigning for power you always try to have white propaganda for yourself and black propaganda for your opponent. So, I know anytime you put something on social media, there are people who care to check, [and] when they check and see inaccurate, they will expose you badly![50]

The strength of the opposing party's 'social media army' acted as a deterrent to disseminating outright lies. This also extends to messaging that could be easily presented by opponents as ethnically divisive and destabilizing, and thus as off-putting to a significant number of voters, with party officials fearful of alienating potential swing voters and/or of failing to mobilize a maximum turnout of supporters as they sought to secure both a majority of parliamentary seats and the presidential election. In our case study area, this was most evident when it came to chieftaincy disputes, which have long been associated with significant tension and periodic bouts of violence,[51] with discussion of the same widely acknowledged as capable of bringing 'unnecessary tension'.[52] Given a widespread fear of violence, popular commitment to peace, cross-ethnic campaigns,[53] and close races in the region, this common analysis ensured that playing politics with such issues was generally frowned upon and often sanctioned by both local and national figures. As an NPP participant in an inter-party FGD in Nanton noted:

> Some of the platforms are dominated by some particular ethnic [groups] based on the geographic location of the constituency. For example, in northern region here Dagombas are the majority, so if you have the tendency to do chieftaincy politics on the platform, or if you want to do ethnic politics, we may remove you.[54]

He was supported by an NDC communicator who added that this was 'because you may offend the minority'.[55]

Such thinking helped to ensure that such cheap stands as the outright politicization of tribal or chieftaincy politics were often quickly sanctioned. As participants in a FGD in Tamale explained:

> We kicked a lot of people out during our chieftaincy funerals because during that time anyone who tried to politicise our chieftaincy issue we normally gave him warning, we kicked them and to be frank, I can't best remember but we exited a lot of people. We don't tolerate chieftaincy, this tribalism and these religious issues, yes, we don't tolerate them.[56]

This intra-party moderation of social media's potentially more divisive and polarizing tendencies was also evident from the scarcity of explicitly ethnic messaging in recent elections with aspirants and activists 'quick to denounce any aspect of their rival's presidential campaign that suggests a party will favour a particular area – such as [President John] Mahama's comments in 2012 that voters in northern Ghana should support him as a fellow northerner'.[57]

This intra-party moderation is not to suggest that all misleading and divisive propaganda was discouraged. On the contrary, while many feared that disinformation that could easily be debunked might backfire, much information is difficult to prove or disprove with a general perception that politics is a dirty game ensuring that allegations of nepotism and corruption, for example, often appear as highly plausible to a broad range of people. In turn, while explicit promises to co-ethnics and the demonization of ethnic 'others' by candidates and party officials are rare, claims that an opponent is nepotistic, corrupt, incompetent, morally bankrupt, a lapsed Christian or Muslim, or a failed wife or husband constitute a mainstay of everyday political debate.[58]

At the same time, the fact that certain messages might be off-putting to many ordinary voters did not mean that politicians always desisted from using them, but that – when they did – they simply made sure

to distance themselves from such messaging. As one NPP activist explained:

> Whatever you say on social media, [people] trace back to you. And that is why the political figures are not able to do [certain forms of] the decampaigning, because it will look like they're involved in politics of insults or attacks, instead of portraying the exemplary leadership you'll want.

The activist went on to note how – while a politician would know 'that, if he himself does that, people can also use it to campaign against him that, "he's intolerant, he's this and he's that, he's always insulting"' – politicians and activists might use anonymous or fake accounts, or their supporters, 'to post those things' for the candidate.[59] The strategy here was simple: an opponent was to be decampaigned without certain types of more divisive and polarizing messaging being directly traceable to the candidate or party.

Wider implications

WhatsApp groups have become the favoured platform for intra-party and candidate organization in Ghana; with impressive reach and oversight. This has been rendered possible by pre-existing party structures and informal networks. Indeed, while WhatsApp organization has become central to political campaigns, it has not fundamentally altered Ghanaian politics. To be competitive, candidates still need to be on an NPP or NDC party ticket, and to persuade voters to turn out and vote for them and against their main opponent. To this end, candidates still have to 'go to the outdooring',[60] and to display – a sometimes contradictory mix – of electoral viability, accessibility, generosity, and civic-mindedness.[61]

In the Ghanaian context, WhatsApp helps – not only with logistics and fund-raising – but with strategizing on, and the sharing, monitoring and controlling, of messaging. Significantly, it does so in

ways that encourage some of the more negative aspects of campaigning in the country – such as fake news and decampaigns – whilst simultaneously helping to check some of the more extreme lies and ethnically or religiously divisive strategies. This is important for intra-group relations and democracy, but once again stems from – rather than produces – the broader political context in which activists and parties are working.

A similar picture is evident in other countries where the increasing use of WhatsApp appears to have reinforced existing party structures, campaign strategies and styles, rather than having transformed them, with very different outcomes depending on the local and national context.[62] The implication of these findings from Ghana and comparative studies is that the (mis)use of social media can never be presumed, but must always be analysed and understood in the particular socio-economic, political and cultural contexts in which it is being adopted and adapted.[63]

Notes

1 Wendy Willems. 2016. 'Beyond free basics: Facebook, data bundles and Zambia's social media internet'. *Africa at LSE*, 1 September. Available at https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2016/09/01/beyond-free-basics-facebook-data-bundles-and-zambias-social-media-internet/; Toussaint Nothias. 'Access granted: Facebook's free basics in Africa'. *Media Culture & Society* 42, 3 (2020), pp. 329–48.

2 Francis B. Nyamnjoh. 'Globalisation, boundaries and livelihoods: Perspectives on Africa'. *Identity, Culture and Politics* 5, 1&2 (2004), pp. 37–59, p. 53.

3 Wisdom J. Tettey. 'Mobile telephony and democracy in Ghana: Interrogating the changing ecology of citizen engagement and political communication'. *Telecommunications Policy* 41 (2017), pp. 685–94, p. 689.

4 Josephine A. Sanny and Edem Selormey. 'Double-edged sword? Ghanaians see pros, cons of social media, want access but not fake news'. *Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 366* (2020). Available at https://

afrobarometer.org/publications/ad366-ghanaians-see-pros-cons-social-media-want-access-not-fake-news

5 Cornelis Kweku Affre. 2020. 'NPP's savvy use of social media cost me 2016 election – Mahama'. *Joy Online*. 4 December. Available at https://www.myjoyonline.com/npps-savvy-use-of-social-media-cost-me-2016-elections-mahama

6 Interview, NPP communicator, Nanton, 29 June 2019.

7 Ransford Edward Van Gyampo. 'Social media, traditional media and party politics in Ghana'. *Africa Review* 9, 2 (2017), pp. 125–39; Elena Gadjanova, Gabrielle Lynch, Jason Reifler and Ghadafi Saibu. 'Social media, cyber battalions and political mobilization in Ghana' (2019). Available at https://www.elenagadjanova.com/uploads/2/1/3/8/21385412/social_media_cyber_battalions_and_political_mobilisation_in_ghana_report_final.pdf; Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justin Willis, *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa: Democracy, Voting and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

8 Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justin Willis. 'Ghana: The ebbing power of incumbency'. *Journal of Democracy* 28, 2 (2017), pp. 92–104; Gadjanova et al. 'Social media, cyber battalions and political mobilization in Ghana'; Van Gyampo, 'Social media, traditional media and party politics in Ghana'; Nic Cheeseman, Jonathan Fisher, Idayat Hassan and Jamie Hitchen. 'Social media disruption: Nigeria's WhatsApp politics'. *Journal of Democracy* 31, 3 (2020), pp. 145–59; Akwasi Bosompem Boateng, Donal Patrick McCracken and Musara Lubombo. 'Intra-party election campaigns in Ghana: An analysis of Facebook use'. in Martin N. Ndlela and Winston Mano (eds), *Social Media and Elections in Africa: Theoretical Perspectives and Election Campaigns* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 215–32.

9 Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent A. Cabañes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines* (Leeds: University of Leeds, Newton Tech4Dev Network, 2018). Available at https://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf

10 In 2016 and 2020, the NDC secured Tamale Central, North and South, and the NPP Nanton.

11 In 2016 the presidential vote was divided thus: Tamale Central 62 per cent NDC and 37 per cent NPP; Tamale North 74 per cent NDC and 25 per cent NPP; Tamale South 72 per cent NDC and 26 per cent NPP; and Nanton 50 per cent NDC and 49 per cent NPP. In 2020 the presidential vote was divided thus: Tamale Central 61 per cent NDC and 37 per cent NPP; Tamale North 69 per cent NDC and 30 per cent NPP; Tamale South 68 per cent NDC and 30 per cent; and Nanton 46 per cent NDC and 53 per cent NPP.

12 For example, see Paul Nugent. 'Living in the past: Rural, urban and ethnic themes in the 1992 and 1996 elections in Ghana'. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, 2 (1999), pp. 287–319; Joseph R. A. Ayee. 'Manifestos and elections in Ghana's Fourth Republic'. *South African Journal of International Affairs* 15, 2 (2011), pp. 185–214; Sebastian Elischer. 'Measuring and comparing party ideology in nonindustrialized societies: Taking party manifesto research to Africa'. *Democratization* 19, 4 (2012), pp. 642–67; Noah L. Nathan, *Electoral Politics and Africa's Urban Transition: Class and Ethnicity in Ghana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

13 European Union Election Observation Mission Ghana. *Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, December 7 2020: Preliminary Statement* (9 December 2020), p. 7. Available at https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eueom_ghana_preliminary_statement_.pdf

14 Nugent. 'Living in the past'; Lindsay Whitfield. 'Change for a better Ghana: Party competition, institutionalization and alternation in Ghana's 2008 elections'. *African Affairs* 108, 433 (2009), pp. 621–41; Ayee. 'Manifestos and elections in Ghana's Fourth Republic'; Cyril K. Daddieh and George M. Bob-Milliar. 'In search of "honorable" membership: Parliamentary primaries and candidate selection in Ghana'. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47, 2 (2012), pp. 204–20.

15 The NDC has gone from securing all of the parliamentary seats in Northern Ghana in 1992, to sharing the seats with the NPP in the 2016 and 2020 elections (9 seats each).

16 George Bob-Milliar. 'Place and party organizations: Party activism inside party-branded sheds at the grassroots in northern Ghana'. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7, 4 (2019), pp. 474–93.

17 Kevin S. Fridy and Victor Brobbey. 'The match and vote for me: The politicisation of Ghana's Accra Hearts of Oak and Kumasi Asante

Kotoko football clubs'. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, 1 (2009), pp. 19–39; George Bob-Milliar. 'Political party activism in Ghana: Factors influencing the decision of the politically active to join a political party'. *Democratization* 19, 4 (2012), pp. 668–89.

18 Interview, NPP youth group member, Tamale North constituency, 15 June 2019.

19 Gadjanova et al. 'Social media, cyber battalions and political mobilization in Ghana', p. 10.

20 Interview, NDC executive member, Nanton, 1 July 2019.

21 Interview, Convention People's Party youth organizer, Accra, 15 July 2019.

22 Interview, NDC executive, Accra, 22 March 2019.

23 Interview, NDC MP, Accra, 12 July 2019.

24 Interview, radio presenter, Tamale, 19 July 2019.

25 Wisdom J. Tettey. 'Talk radio and politics in Ghana: Exploring civic and (un)civil discourse in the public sphere'. in L. Gunner, D. Moyo and D. Ligaga (eds), *Radio in Africa: Cultures, Publics and Communities* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), pp. 19–35.

26 Interview, NDC leader, Accra, 20 March 2019.

27 Cheeseman et al. *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa*.

28 Cf. Stephen Ellis. 'Tuning in to pavement radio'. *African Affairs* 88, 352 (1989), pp. 321–30, p. 321; see Elena Gadjanova, Gabrielle Lynch and Ghadafi Saibu. 'Pavement radio in the social media age: How misinformation crosses digital divides in Northern Ghana'. Working Paper (2021).

29 Gadjanova et al. 'Social media, cyber battalions and political mobilization in Ghana'. p. 13.

30 Boateng et al. 'Intra-party election campaigns in Ghana', p. 224.

31 Jennifer Stromer-Galley. *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 2 and 3 (emphasis in the original).

32 Interview, NPP communicator, Tamale, 18 July 2019.

33 FGD, NPP member, Tamale, 24 June 2019.

34 FGD, Nanton, 29 June 2019.

35 FGD, NPP communicator, Nanton, 29 June 2019.

36 Interview, NPP youth, Tamale, 18 June 2019.

37 Interview, NPP communicator, Nanton, 29 June 2019.

38 FGD, NDC organizer, Nanton, 29 June 2019.
39 Interview, NDC communicator, Accra, 14 March 2019.
40 Interview, NPP leader, Accra, 16 July 2019.
41 FGD NPP communicator, Nanton, 29 June 2019.
42 FGD, NPP communicator, Tamale, 24 June 2019.
43 Interview, NPP communicator, Nanton, 29 June 2019.
44 Paul Nugent. 'Winners, losers and also rans: Money, moral authority and voting patterns in the Ghana 2000 elections'. *African Affairs* 100, 400 (2001), pp. 405–28; Elena Gadjanova. 'Electoral clientelism as status affirmation in Africa: Evidence from Ghana'. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 55, 4 (2017), pp. 593–621; Cheeseman et al. *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa*.
45 Gadjanova et al. 'Social media, cyber battalions and political mobilization in Ghana'. p. 3.
46 Interview, NDC youth group member, Tamale, 14 June 2019.
47 Affre. 'NPP's savvy use of social media cost me 2016 election – Mahama'.
48 Sanny and Selormey. 'Double-edged sword?'. p. 1.
49 Gabrielle Lynch, Nic Cheeseman and Justin Willis. 'From peace campaigns to peaceocracy: Elections, order and authority in Africa'. *African Affairs* 118, 473 (2019), pp. 603–27.
50 Interview, NPP party activist, Nanton, 23 July 2019.
51 Jesse Salah Ovadia. 'Stepping back from the brink: A review of the 2008 Ghanaian election from the capital of the northern region'. *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 45, 2 (2011), pp. 310–40.
52 Interview, NPP party activist, Nanton, 23 July 2019.
53 See Elena Gadjanova. 'Status-quo or grievance coalitions: The logic of cross-ethnic campaign appeals in Africa's highly diverse states'. *Comparative Political Studies* 54, 3 (2020), pp. 652–85.
54 FGD, NPP official, Nanton, 29 June 2019.
55 FGD, NDC organizer, Nanton, 29 June 2019.
56 FGD Youth Group, youth group member, Tamale, 24 June 2019.
57 Cheeseman et al. *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa*, p. 242.
58 Ibid.
59 Interview, journalist, Tamale, 19 July 2019.
60 Cited in Gadjanova et al. 'Social media, cyber battalions and political mobilization in Ghana'. p. 13.

61 Cheeseman et al. *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa*.

62 Cheeseman et al. 'Social media disruption'.; Eloïse Betrand, Grace Natabaalo and Jamie Hitchen. *Connecting with Constituents? Parliamentary Aspirants' Use of WhatsApp in Uganda's 2021 'Scientific' Election*. Westminster Foundation for Democracy (May 2021). Available at https://www.wfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Parliamentary-aspirants-use-of-WhatsApp-in-Ugandas-2021-elections.pdf.

63 For example, see Maggie Dwyer and Thomas Molony (eds). *Social Media and Politics in Africa: Democracy, Censorship and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2019); Sharath Srinivasan, R. Stephanie Diepeveen and George Karekwaivanane. 'Rethinking publics in Africa in a digital age'. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 13, 1 (2019), pp. 2–17; Cheeseman et al. 'Social media disruption'.