

ABSTRACT

With the rapid adoption of mobile phones in Africa, social media has suddenly enabled ordinary citizens to engage political leaders and other public figures directly. This has led to tremendous change in public life. Public institutions are benefiting from the increased participation of ordinary Africans in the political and policy processes. However, social media has also led to some negative unintended consequences. Ethnicism and sectarianism are thriving as a result. Kenya has been a leader in the spread both of mobile phone and social media use in Africa. This is one important reason why it was chosen to gauge the impact of social media use on political participation in Africa. Kenya is a bellwether for trends in Africa.

The research in the summer of 2014 found evidence that social media indeed is empowering ordinary Kenyans to engage public figures and institutions more effectively and to shape the latter. The research found that those public figures and institutions that had adapted to the new digitised environment were influencing public discourse more effectively in their favour. It also found that a new class of Kenyans—the digital citizens—had greater influence with policymakers, and had an enhanced capacity to influence support or lack thereof for the latter at the grassroots. The research found that this influence could be positive as well as negative—in the sense that lies or hatemongering could easily spread from social networking sites to the village rumour mill. The study concluded that the widespread adoption of social media was more of a boon for the institutions of national life than a drawback, especially in a climate in which hard-won media freedoms are being lost.