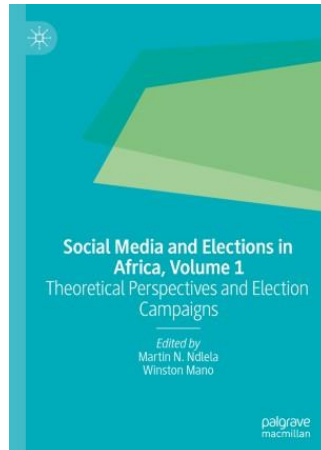


## BOOK REVIEW

Ernest Darkwa\*:

**Social Media and Elections in Africa: Theoretical Perspectives and Election Campaigns** edited by Martin N. Ndlela and Winston Mano

***Social Media and Elections in Africa: Theoretical Perspectives and Election Campaigns*,  
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Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, ISBN 97830 30305529, Pp. 237**

The central idea of the book *Social Media and Elections in Africa* is that by opening new channels for political engagement, mobilization, and communication, social media has fundamentally changed African political communication and election campaigns, information dissemination and processes, changing the nature of elections throughout the continent. In light of this, the book investigates how the rise of social media on the African continent has profoundly influenced several political participation and communication aspects, improving pertinent domains such as public opinion, election campaigns, citizen participation, voter mobilization, and the dynamism of political discourse. The book also highlights the negative aspects of using social media for the creation and dissemination of hate speech, disinformation, and fake news, particularly during elections, as well as the motivations behind it. As a result, the book argues that social media, although a helpful tool for complementing traditional media, also comes with challenges as it may help spread fake news and misleading information, as well as serve as a forum for inclusive and broadly disseminated political conversation. The book offers a comprehensive analysis of the enormous influence of social media on political communication through several case studies from various African nations, including Ghana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Uganda, Cameroon, and Eswatini.

In Chapter 1 for instance, Ndlela and Mano draw attention to the transformative role social media platforms- such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc., have in enhancing an inclusive sphere of political communication in Africa using a comparative analysis of different countries (p. 2-3). The eleven chapters offer a strong basis for understanding the various ways that political discourse and public opinion have been continuously influenced, including voter education, political involvement online, electoral mobilization, and information sharing. It therefore offers a critical understanding of the ways through which social media opens new collections and reserves of political communication that are mediated through digital and the networked platforms of the new media (p. 60). As a result, it offers a framework for comprehending social media's important and developing role as the new political media behemoth and the dynamics of African democratization.

In examining the ways that new media, particularly social media is shaping politics and electoral campaigning in Africa, Ndlela and Mano point out the changing dynamics of electoral campaigning by emphasizing that social media have served to gradually complement a role that was previously occupied by the traditional media- including the Television, Radio, and Newspapers- with political party communicators and candidates utilizing the platforms for sharing and engaging with electorates on political messages and mobilizing significant support from them. For instance, in the case of Ghana, Dzisah in Chapter 6 as well as Boateng et al., in Chapter 11 speak to the case of Ghana using the 2016 General elections in Ghana as a point of reference. The authors emphasize how digital media have occupied a beneficial role in creating a much wider space for both political parties and electorates to participate in political discussions and debates online, which have largely served to complement the traditional media's functions in political communication. The authors also highlight how Ghana's two major political parties—the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP)—have enhanced their political discourse by using social media to reach a wider audience. It also highlights how political parties and the media have exploited social media platforms in Ghana to disseminate false information, biased news reporting, and fake news. Similarly, chapters 5 and 8 by Munoriyarwa and Chambwere as well as Mare and Matsilele respectively emphasize the substantial impact of social media as a new media tool that has significantly enhanced political communication, participation, and citizen involvement in politics in Zimbabwe.

The book also highlights how, during the past few years and currently, social media platforms for political and electoral involvement have had a transformational impact. It discusses how social media influenced the Arab Spring, particularly in 2010 and beyond,

especially in Tunisia and Egypt, and how it has become a hub for political action and social media participation throughout the continent (p. 9). Also, it emphasizes the other side of social media, regarding its negative usage- drawing attention to how political parties, their supporters, and the media have capitalized on the open platforms of social media in building and extending a new form of digital political propaganda which are largely meant to misinform the public, spread fake news intending to discredit mostly political opponents.

A significant contribution of the book is that it provides a clear framework for contextualizing concepts including political communication, participation, and social media propaganda, and how this is applied in the context of African politics. For instance, Ndlela and Mano in Chapter 1 emphasize political communication and social media use by highlighting the extent to which African countries have significantly adopted the social media revolution from the developed world in Europe and North America and applied it in their contextualization of political communication to encompass information dissemination, electoral mobilization, and citizen political engagement (p. 7). They also draw substantial attention to the hybridity and nature of political campaign strategies on the continent regarding the mechanisms employed by political parties and actors in mobilizing and engaging citizens and electorate's response to messages shared by political communicators online- and the feedback in the form of creating online contents and providing comments, likes, shares, and disapproval in the form of feedback to the messages shared by political parties and candidates.

This is an important approach of the book regarding how it presents a form of model that is largely analytical and helps significantly in examining mechanisms of digital media within the African political communication landscape- with consideration for the positive impacts of digital platforms on political engagement and participation as well as the “affective machinery” of the platforms in sharing misinformation and fake news in the form of political propaganda (p. 41-2). Thus, the book's strengths are seen in how it provides a form of epistemology that elaborates on African democratization and the digital media wave as an exclusive project despite its roots within the politics of the developed world. This provides a significant communication and research angle for studying and analyzing African democracies- in the context of contemporary media and beyond and how it shapes wider political participation and at the same time reinforces an affective and algorithmic propaganda of misinformation in the political sphere.

Furthermore, the comparative strategy and the case studies that are used in the book provide room for comparing and comprehending the varying dynamics of social media and politics in the African continent (p. 43). For instance, in Chapter 10, Muzee and

Enaifoghe make an analysis of political communication and participation in Uganda by emphasizing how citizen engagement and mobilization become widespread and participatory on social media in a country where free speech and political participation are largely reduced. The authors point to the use of social media in recent elections in Uganda where the opposition candidate Bobi Wine, despite restrictions on freedoms of speech and political mobilization in the country was able to resort to social media to reach out to a larger online audience and mobilize support (p. 205). Hence, digital platforms provide the spaces for expressing political opinions and mobilizing political support and discourses that extend beyond the political control boundaries. However, it is important to point out that the platforms of social media also serve as avenues where debates on public opinion tend to be polarized. This was seen in the Zimbabwean elections in the year 2018 where social platforms were used to polarize public opinion and debates (p. 27). Thus, social media could serve to enhance participation and space to voice out public opinions but may also serve as a site for polarization.

Notwithstanding the very good case studies and countries the book uses for its analysis, it is important to emphasize that there was less use of French and Portuguese-speaking African countries. There was just a chapter on Cameroon which doubles as a French and English-speaking country. I believe it would have been useful to compare cases from French and Portuguese-speaking African countries in making the analysis more in-depth. Also, it would have been useful for the book to have investigated the reasons accounting for why notwithstanding the great use of social media in electoral mobilization, there is still low turnover in elections mostly among the youth. Hence, further research needs to investigate this perspective as well.

To conclude, it is without a doubt that the book makes an important analysis regarding the role of social media in shaping contemporary political communication in Africa. This is with regards to how social media enhances electoral campaigning, reaching a larger audience, mobilizing people, and harnessing participation amongst the public and at the same time reinforcing the tendencies with its affective architecture and algorithms in creating propagandist frames that foster misinformation, fake news, polarization, and online political victimization. Future research could delve deeper into the cases of French and Portuguese-speaking African countries and the tendency of social media to create polarization and misinformation over digital spaces.

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