



# #speakup

## BAROMETER

UGANDA

ASSESSING DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

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## Imprint

#speakup barometer

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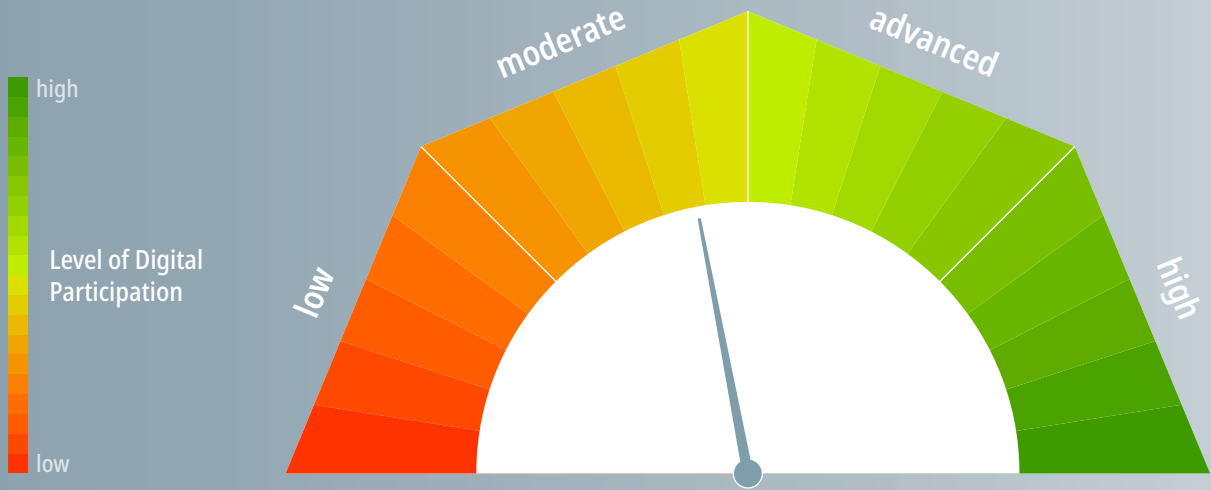
Carsten von Nahmen

### PROJECT LEAD

Petra Berner, Steffen Leidel

### AUTHORS

Lena Nitsche, Julius Endert



The overall results of the #speakup barometer research suggest that the level of digital participation among the Ugandan population is still comparatively low as the needle is pointing into the orange section of the barometer. In particular, the cost of Internet access, as well as problems in the digital rights sector, are barriers to greater digital participation.

## Key Findings

Uganda is full of extremes, including the digital divide between the countryside and the cities, the disconnect between constitutional guarantees regarding freedom of expression and the reality of its implementation in the face of controversial media laws and a powerful regulator. The traditional media scene in the capital is diverse (radio, TV, print and online) and quite critical and many people have access. On the countryside radio still dominates with much less access to social media. While there are many developments that influence digital participation negatively, there are also many trends that clearly point in a positive direction.



### ACCESS

High data costs are one of the main factors hindering digital participation rates in Uganda. But the country's stated commitment to infrastructure development could bring down prices, which is cause for optimism.



### SOCIETY

Ugandans love the Internet and usage rates, while still relatively low, are growing quickly. But this rapid expansion has also led to problems in a society still largely organized along traditional lines.



### DIGITAL RIGHTS

Rights to online expression in Uganda are under threat. They are constrained by overly broad, vaguely defined laws that can be used by politicians to criminalize speech on the Internet they do not like.



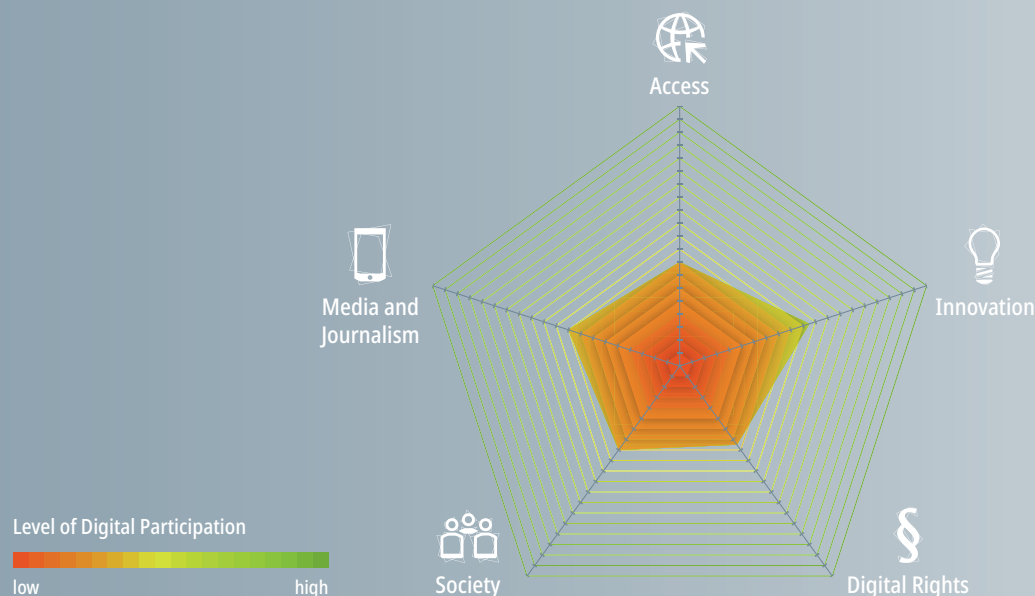
### INNOVATION

Despite serious challenges around red tape, infrastructure and poor capital flows, Uganda's government has plans to jump start the country's ICT sector. Observers say there's reason for cautious optimism.



### MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

A social media explosion, the dominance of radio and a government in fear of losing control. It can be hard to find your bearings in Uganda's media landscape—the risks and potential for participation sit side by side.



Specific results for various factors influencing digital participation in Uganda. The better the results in a specific cluster, the more the color field extends to the greener, outer edge of the web. While restrictive media laws negatively impacted results in the field of digital results, positive developments on the innovation scene have resulted in a higher level of digital participation.



## Access: New investments could bring down costs

High data costs are one of the main factors hindering digital participation rates in Uganda. But the country's stated commitment to infrastructure development could bring down prices, which is cause for optimism.

Internet penetration in Uganda is still comparatively low. Different sources report different penetration rates for Uganda in 2016: ranging from 22 percent (ITU)<sup>1</sup>, 31 percent (Internet World Stats)<sup>2</sup>, and 45 percent (Ugandan National IT Authority)<sup>3</sup>.

Our interviewees reported that Uganda lags behind its neighbors Kenya and Tanzania. According to Sarah Kiden, IT expert and current Ford-Mozilla Open Web Fellow, Internet penetration rates in urban areas in Uganda are good, but online use in rural regions remains low. Even though the rise of the mobile Internet has helped bring more rural people online, infrastructure and

ICTs remain mostly concentrated in urban areas, where only 18 percent of Ugandans live. The result is a significant urban-rural divide<sup>4</sup>. However, a study<sup>5</sup> carried out by the National Information Technology Authority Uganda (NITA-U) showed that mobile phone penetration rose from 52 percent in 2014 to 71 percent in 2017, with rural growth even outpacing that in urban areas. Neema Iyer of Pollicy, an organization focused on using technology and data to improve public-service delivery in Uganda, argues that one of the main reasons people do not use the Internet is cost, especially regarding data.

<sup>1</sup> ITU Statistics: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Internet World Stats Uganda: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/af/ug.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Uganda National Information Technologie Authority (NITA); Statistical Abstract 2016, <https://www.nita.go.ug/sites/default/files/publications/NITA-U%20Statistical%20Abstract%202016.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Uganda National Information Technologie Authority (NITA); Statistical Abstract 2016, <https://www.nita.go.ug/sites/default/files/publications/NITA-U%20Statistical%20Abstract%202016.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Daily Monitor; More Ugandans now own mobile phones: <http://www.monitor.co.ug/Business/Technology/-Ugandans-mobile-phones--National-IT-Survey-NITA/688612-4334138-2fb1ruz/index.html>

In 2016, 1GB of mobile prepaid data cost<sup>6</sup> 15 percent of the average national income. This is an improvement over the previous year, when the same data package would have eaten up 27 percent of an average Ugandan income. But it is still high compared to neighboring Kenya and Tanzania, where the comparable costs are 4 percent and 6 percent respectively. This means that data costs in Uganda are out of reach for the majority of citizens. Mobile phones are not the problem; they are relatively cheap. The ITEL feature phone from China's Tecno Mobile costs around 10 USD<sup>7</sup>. A battery charge can last up to seven days and the phone allows users to browse websites and use services such as Facebook Zero.

In the capital Kampala, there is a growing middle and upper class which can afford expensive internet bundles, says DW Akademie country representative for Uganda Miriam Ohlsen. Even though costs have gone down over the years, affordability still remains an issue, especially in rural areas, adds Kiden. In some areas,

**“ Even if the Internet is available, there is still a question of whether it is actually used and if there is an awareness of what it can be useful for.**

**Miriam Ohlsen, DW Akademie Uganda**

investment is not very profitable for Internet service providers given the lack of population density and the low usage rates. This leads to a weak network infrastructure and a lack of competition among providers which would drive down prices.

While availability is better in urban regions, so is the overall Internet experience. According to Kiden, many providers offer Internet packages that enable users to access cloud-based services, transfer files, watch videos, etc. There have been some initiatives to bring higher-quality services to more people. In 2006, several educational institutions teamed up to establish the Research and Education Network Uganda (RENU)<sup>8</sup>, which allows them to buy Internet services in bulk from an international supplier instead of a local provider. Connected campuses can offer Internet speeds up to 1GB/second. However, these services reach only a

small percentage of the population, leaving the majority access only to the lower-quality, local services.

Ugandans can also get online at Internet cafés, community centers or public Wi-Fi spots. However, Ohlsen says that some community centers offering Internet access sometimes have a bad reputation within rural communities. According to people working at the centers, the local communities feel like users, especially boys, are wasting their time in the centers.

#### **What are the most important issues?**

While it is easy and affordable for Ugandans to get access to a mobile phone, data costs remain high. This is one of the biggest challenges to getting more people online. Abaas Mpindi, founder of the journalism training center Media Challenge Initiative, says there is a strong link between Internet use and income. If he had one dollar either to buy food or Internet access, “I would definitely go for food,” he said.

Digital literacy is a strong indicator of how motivated people are to use the internet or access information. “People don't know how to search or find information and digital platforms are not a ‘must’ for them,” Mpindi added. Higher digital literacy rates would create higher demand for better and more affordable Internet access.

#### **What happens next?**

New investments in Internet infrastructure in rural areas could bring down data prices in Uganda.

Uganda's “Vision 2040”<sup>9</sup>, a strategy outlining the country's socio-economic development, highlights the importance of the digital economy and states that “Uganda shall continuously build robust, ultra-high speed, pervasive, intelligent, and trusted high-speed ICT infrastructure all over the country in line with the changing technologies.” The strategy also emphasizes that infrastructure developments will be accompanied by a focus on digital literacy and capacity building.

Lately, Uganda has seen new infrastructure investments that could help narrow the digital divide. For example, Facebook has announced a partnership with Airtel Uganda and Bandwidth & Cloud Services Group, a wholesale telecoms infrastructure provider serving nations in East Africa, to build approximately 770 km of fiber backhaul connectivity<sup>10</sup> in northwest Uganda that would cover three million people.

<sup>6</sup> Alliance for affordable Internet (A4AI); Mobile Data Cost 2016: <http://a4ai.org/mobile-broadband-pricing-data/>

<sup>7</sup> Dignited; Here is what we know about iTel Phones and prices in Uganda, <http://www.dignited.com/12106/known-itel-phones-prices-uganda/>

<sup>8</sup> Research and Education Network for Uganda (RENU), <https://renu.ac.ug/>

<sup>9</sup> National Planning Authority (NPA); Uganda Vision 2040, <http://npa.ug/wp-content/themes/npatheme/documents/vision2040.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Code facebook; Here is what we know about iTel Phones and prices in Uganda, <https://code.facebook.com/posts/1642803246023947/airtel-and-bcs-with-support-from-facebook-to-build-shared-fiber-backhaul-connectivity-in-uganda/>

### How can access be improved?

Making ICT infrastructure development a government priority is crucial for a country's development. With "Vision 2040", Uganda has already included infrastructure development as a priority. Kiden says Uganda is catching up and that the investments in infrastructure described above are a first step toward achieving this vision. According to her, the next stage should be capacity building with government officials.

The government also sees the growing importance of a multi-stakeholder dialogue when it comes to Internet gover-

nance. Kiden says that cooperation between the government, civil society, and the private sector has improved in recent years. For example, the National IT Authority - Uganda (NITA-U), under the guidance of the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance (MoICT), promotes and monitors information technology developments in Uganda. Another example is the Uganda Internet Governance Forum, which MoICT has been co-hosting with the Internet Society - Uganda Chapter for the past few years. As a result of this cooperation, the issue of online child safety<sup>11</sup> has been identified as especially important and a toolkit with learning resources has been developed.



## Digital Rights: Civic space continues to be constrained

*Rights to online expression in Uganda are under threat. They are constrained by overly broad, vaguely defined laws that can be used by politicians to criminalize speech on the Internet they do not like.*

The rights to freedom of expression and access to information are guaranteed in Article 29(1)(a) of Uganda's constitution, but a number of laws on the books have tightened control of content in the media and on the web while limiting speech. Government

right to privacy of any person." This legislation could potentially lead to removals of content and the criminalization of user comments. The Uganda Communications Act from 2013 notes that the regulator, the Ugandan Communications Commission (UCC),

has the power in a state of emergency to direct operators to employ a network in a specified manner. In addition, the Regulation of Interception of Communications Act requires companies to install surveillance technology that enables real-time surveillance and allows the government to intercept communications for national security matters. To Geoffrey Ssebaggala, Executive Director of witnessradio.org, these laws seek to "target the online space and criminalize online content." While there is no one law that specifically curtails online freedoms, current legislation could be used to do so due to overly broad, vaguely defined statutes.

**“Uganda lives at two extremes - one offers a lot of freedom, but then you have a regulator issuing very old-fashioned regulations banning the media from covering an event live or shutting down a radio station.**

**Wairagala Wakabi, CIPESA**

mistrust of the media and online communication increased as the Internet as a communication medium for expression by the country's citizens has grown.

For example, the vaguely worded section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act 2011 prohibits "offensive communication" and threatens fines and imprisonment to anyone using "electronic communication to disturb or attempt to disturb the peace, quiet or

Digital participation in Uganda is especially problematic when the interests of those in power are concerned. In 2017, the UCC issued a ban on live streaming parliamentary discussions over the age limit of presidential candidates. Even if the ban<sup>12</sup> was lifted shortly thereafter, it underlined the fact that free speech in Uganda has its limits.

Laws and regulations issued by the government are affecting digital participation of the citizens. "It does not seem, at the

<sup>11</sup> Uganda National Information Technology Authority (NITA); Promoting Child Online Safety: <https://www.nita.go.ug/media/promoting-child-online-safety>

<sup>12</sup> Reuters; Uganda bans live coverage after House fistfights, protests against Museveni, <https://af.reuters.com/article/africaTech/idAFKCN1C-21JV-OZATP>

end of the day, that the voice of the people matter”, says Gerald Businge Ateenyi, managing director at Ultimate Multimedia Consult, a Ugandan digital communications company. He sees a level of resignation among many people to comment on political and critical issues, and they primarily go online for entertainment and to engage in personal communications. Ssebaggala of witnessradio.org wants the government to re-examine laws regulating cyberspace. “Their main objective is to fight crime, they were not enacted to promote user’s rights and freedoms,” he said. “In the end, this kills the good intention of the Internet”.

“ There have been a couple of worrying developments. These include the registration of online content providers and the moves to tax social media usage.

Juliet Nanfuka, CIPESA

While political activists and journalists are more aware now than ever before about the laws and regulations as well as government pressure that threatens digital security and speech, most users do not understand the growing threat around online spaces, said Ssebaggala. “We are still in the honeymoon phase of digital transformation. People are still excited.”

However, a significant number of people did show their ability to resist attempts at limited online access. During the Internet shutdowns around the 2016 elections, people fought back by using alternative communication channels<sup>13</sup> such as virtual private networks (VPN).

#### What are the most important issues?

Activist Stella Nyanzi during her court trial at Buganda Road Court in April 2017.

The laws and rules imposed on cyberspace have negatively impacted user rights and freedoms and had a chilling effect on expression online. Journalists, bloggers, activists, and even regular users have been arrested and charged under the Computer Misuse Act 2011. For example, in 2017, university academic and activist Dr. Stella Nyanzi was charged for “repeatedly insulting the person of the President” on her Facebook Page. She spent 33 days in jail before being released on bail<sup>14</sup>. Her fight continues<sup>15</sup> with authorities questioning her sanity<sup>16</sup> which further delays court proceedings.

As Uganda’s president embarks on his 32nd years in office, resignation among citizens to change political power structures is growing, as is the fear of speaking out.

Increased self-censorship is a concern in Uganda as people who raise critical voices fear both online and offline harassment and bullying. Neema Iyer from the technology consulting and development organization Pollicy asks: “In terms of freedom of speech – yes, you can say whatever you want, but are you prepared to take the backlash that comes with it?” According to

her, critical users have to fear harassment and bullying online and offline. The legal and societal backlashes lead to widespread self-censorship. Social media users often set up pseudonymous accounts to protect their anonymity<sup>17</sup>. Self-censorship also concerns journalists in Uganda, since “many don’t cover the real issues of public interest in the way that they should and we do attract some criticism for that.”, says Ateenyi.

In June 2017 the Ugandan government announced that a new social media monitoring unit<sup>18</sup> has been set up. As well, Privacy International reported<sup>19</sup> that police and the military used the intrusion malware FinFisher to infect the communication devices of opposition leaders and media. Although these reports have been denied by the Ugandan government, it led to a widespread perception among citizens that their communications are being monitored. “This has implications on the level of participation”, said Wakabi.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; African Media Barometer, [http://www.fesmedia-africa.org/uploads/media/Uganda\\_AMB\\_Online\\_2016.pdf](http://www.fesmedia-africa.org/uploads/media/Uganda_AMB_Online_2016.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> CIPESA; State of the Internet Freedom in Africa: [https://cipesa.org/?wpfb\\_dl=254](https://cipesa.org/?wpfb_dl=254)

<sup>15</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights; Human Rights prevails in case of Stella Nyanzi before U.N. working group on arbitrary detention: <https://rfkhumanrights.org/news/robert-f-kennedy-human-rights-prevails-in-case-of-stella-nyanzi-before-u-n-working-group-on-arbitrary-detention>

<sup>16</sup> Daily Monitor; Preliminary ruling in Dr Nyanzi case for today: <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Court-rule-whether-continue-case-Dr-Nyanzi/688334-4331506-6b178kz/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> Freedom on the Net Report 2017; Country Report Uganda: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/uganda>

<sup>18</sup> Reporters without borders; Uganda creates unit to spy on social networks, <https://rsf.org/en/news/uganda-creates-unit-spy-social-networks>

<sup>19</sup> Privacy International; For God and My President: State Surveillance in Uganda, [https://privacyinternational.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/Uganda\\_Report\\_1.pdf](https://privacyinternational.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/Uganda_Report_1.pdf)

### What happens next?

Recently, the digital rights situation in Uganda has worsened said Juliet Nanfuka from CIPESA. These actions are likely to have an impact on free expression and access to information by citizens and the media alike while also serving to perpetuate a culture of self-censorship and limited opportunity for online civic engagement Nanfuka thinks.

One main worry is the existing power structure which gives a lot of authority to a small amount of people who can decide to close a media outlet or interrupt online communications in politically sensible situations. Cases brought to court to fight this concentration of power might not be decided for years. The communications regulator, UCC, has become even more powerful after an amendment of the Uganda Communications Act in 2017. The change eliminated oversight of the telecommunications minister who directs the UCC. In March 2018, the UCC published a statement in which they advised “All online data communication service providers, including online publishers, online news platforms, online radio and television operators (...) to apply and obtain authorizations from the Uganda Communications Commission with immediate effect in order to avoid the risk of enforcement.” This step to further control online spaces could mean that millions of websites become inaccessible, since only 14 publishers completed the registration<sup>20</sup> so far.

Ssebaggala doubts the situation will change for the better over the next years. “People use the Internet to speak out in society and demand change, and that is the government’s fear. So their

role is to kill active participation as long as they are still in power,” he said. Civic space in Uganda continues to be cramped down. As with the situation now, the tightening of the net will continue, as long as people speak out and claim their civic spaces on the net.

### How can digital rights be improved?

As many more users come online, online spaces in Uganda will be subject to more control and criminalization of Internet freedom. “This is a space we all need to claim, we need to fight for it”, stresses Geoffrey Ssebaggala.

Juliet Nanfuka from CIPESA points out that her organization has worked with legislators in various countries in Africa, including Uganda. For her, capacity building towards issues such as access to information and data privacy are crucial to enable more legislators to defend positions promoting freedom of speech. Capacity building is also important for other groups, such as the media, and as such journalists should report more on digital rights issues. However, since the majority of people in Uganda live in rural areas, it is also important to focus on citizens in rural communities and their ability to demand accountability and transparency.

This also includes issues of digital security. It is crucial that citizens become more aware of the dangers of online communication and learn how to enhance digital security, for example by using VPNs, open source tools like Tor for anonymous browsing or Thunderbird for email encryption.



## Media and Journalism: Journalists under threat

*A social media explosion, the dominance of radio and a government in fear of losing control. It can be hard to find your bearings in Uganda’s media landscape—the risks and potential for participation sit side by side.*

A recent study<sup>21</sup> from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism nails it: In Uganda, the media scene is vibrant, at least on the face of it, with dozens of newspapers and magazines, and hundreds of radio and television stations operating. However, underneath is an industry in peril as the difficult economic and political environment, coupled with the rise of social media, take their toll.

The overarching question that author James Tumusiime pointed out is: “How to save journalism amid the disruption?”

One major challenge: Journalists are restricted in their work and not able to report freely and independently. Reporters without Borders, in its 2017 World Press Freedom Index<sup>22</sup>, ranked Uganda in 112th place out of 180. “Acts of intimidation and violence against journalists are an almost daily occurrence in Uganda. Since Yoweri Museveni became president in 1986, many journalists who do not toe the government line have been suspended, stripped of their equipment, or badly beaten by ruling party members or security agents.”

<sup>20</sup> Monitor: <http://www.monitor.co.ug/OpEd/Commentary/govts-mark-Press-Freedom-Day-crackdown-online-journalism-689364-4541516-6rom-b7z/index.htm>

<sup>21</sup> Reuters Institute; A non-profit approach to market-driven journalism challenges in Uganda: A case study of Uganda Radio Network [http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-10/A\\_non\\_profit\\_approach\\_to\\_market\\_driven\\_journalism\\_challenges\\_in\\_Uganda.pdf](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-10/A_non_profit_approach_to_market_driven_journalism_challenges_in_Uganda.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Reporters without Borders; Ranking 2018: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>



In addition, the government still perceives the Internet as a threat. The country's police service has set up a specialized social media monitoring unit<sup>23</sup>, according to Reporters without Borders, and digital rights are restricted by a number of laws. The result is self-censorship and an avoidance of being too critical of the powerful. According to Gerald Businge Ateenyi, managing director at the Ugandan digital communications company Ultimate Multimedia Consult, the country's media is free, and freedom of speech is anchored in law, but people know they can get

which works to innovate the delivery of government services across Africa., "Nobody cares about sources, why they would have written it. People don't really think about that stuff."

Access to relevant news and information remains problematic. Social media is primarily a platform for youth in urban areas, a recent study by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS)<sup>24</sup> found. In rural areas, where 77 percent of Uganda's population of 37 million lives, poor infrastructure limits digital participation. And

where the Internet is available, the data is often too expensive. "If I have to decide to either buy food or buy an Internet data package, I definitely go for the food", said Abaas Mpindi, founder of the Media Challenge Initiative, a journalism training NGO. In addition, according to KAS, about 40 percent of the rural population are illiterate and thus have no access to social media platforms. Even among those who do read, most social media written content is in English; local languages are generally not represented.

**“ We need a continuous process of what I call digital literacy. Users need a solid education when it comes to social media.**

**Abaas Mpindi, Media Challenge Initiative**

in trouble for what they say. "Even traditional media would rather cover stories of entertainment and business conferences. Few are investigating what companies really do, what politicians really do. Journalists are playing safe and citizens are playing safe," he said. "Many journalists don't cover the real issues of public interest in the way that they should and we do attract some criticism for that. Some have turned to social media, posting some of the things they feel otherwise wouldn't bring up."

#### **What are the most important issues?**

But online journalism has its own problems, like anywhere else in the world: "There is a lot of 'fast-food journalism' on the Internet", said Christine Mawadri, a digital consultant and radio journalist and trainer. Working conditions for journalists are bad and while reporters once got a monthly salary, now they are mostly paid per story these days. "They pick stories from almost anything and anywhere. They don't take time for research because it would take up a lot of time. They wouldn't get enough stories and wouldn't get paid."

Another issue of concern is fake news and the proliferation of false information online. "It spreads like fire via Facebook and more and more via messenger apps, but there is no confirmation. It is just a story that somebody wrote. I don't know if it actually happened," said Neema Iyer, founder of Pollicy, a group

For those with access, the medium is often used for entertainment or communications among friends and family. Even if younger, urban people do encounter online content on political topics, relatively few would find it relevant to their lives or interests. Nearly two-thirds of respondents to a DW Akademie study<sup>25</sup> on Internet users in the eastern city of Mbale and close on 80 percent in the northern cities of Gulu and Lira said they had never used the Internet to get political information.

The result of this combination of low accessibility levels, high data prices, and content which seems irrelevant to many is that radio, with a countrywide penetration rate of over 90 percent, is the most widely used media platform. It does not depend on the power grid and is free of charge. In addition, radio can be accessed on many mobile phones and Uganda's mobile phone penetration rate is around 40 percent.

#### **What happens next?**

And yet it is the Internet and the digitization of the media that can give rise to a diverse, free, and participative media landscape in Uganda. The country has the second-youngest population on the planet after Niger; about 78 percent of Ugandans are children or young adults under the age of 30. It is precisely this cohort—younger people, students—who are enthusiastically embracing social media, along with professionals. Now social media

<sup>23</sup> Reporters without Borders; Uganda creates unit to spy on social networks, <https://rsf.org/en/news/uganda-creates-unit-spy-social-networks>

<sup>24</sup> Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung; Assessing the Impact of Social Media, <http://www.kas.de/uganda/en/publications/43976/>

<sup>25</sup> Deutsche Welle Akademie; Media Use among Youth in Uganda, <http://www.dw.com/en/study-media-use-among-youth-in-uganda/a-19462967>

use is expanding in the business community, especially as the mobile phone becomes an important Internet tool<sup>26</sup>.

For young journalists and users engaged in online debates, the Internet allows them to fly under the government's radar, a fact that makes officials nervous. "People's awareness of digital and what they can do with it is growing too fast for the regulator," according to digital consultant Mawadri. "Subsequently the government does not know how to contain some news."

Blogs, citizen journalists, and independent media outlets provide an alternative source of information. Mainstream media houses will often refrain from publishing stories that compromise their relationships with influential figures or companies. For instance, the arrest of the FDC party secretary for environment, Zainabu Fatuma Naigaga, in October 2015 was widely shared on social media before it made it to mainstream outlets. This was later followed by a social media campaign dubbed #StopPoliceBrutalityUg.

#### How can media and journalism be improved?

So there is a good deal of potential. Digital technology is giving

journalists the opportunity to report from remote areas, produce multimedia content in local languages, and bring the concerns of these communities into the public debate while helping ensure the quality of the online debate. "I think that the role of the journalist now is more authenticating information online," said Mpindi of the Media Challenge Initiative. He added that while many journalists feel they are losing their privileged positions, he himself disagrees. He thinks people need journalists now more than ever because in addition to verifying information, they can objectively lead online public debates, follow up on stories that break online, and go deep into topics in diverse communities, bringing them to a larger public in ways that might not be possible for citizen journalists. "That's why I think journalism is still intact," he said.

But for some traditional media houses, adopting strategies on the efficient use of new media tools has been a challenge, even though by doing so, they would better communicate with their audience and have a better rate of engagement with them. "We need a continuous process of what I call digital literacy," said Mpindi.



## Society: Between digital enthusiasm and tradition

*Ugandans love the Internet and usage rates, while still relatively low, are growing quickly. But this rapid expansion has also led to problems in a society still largely organized along traditional lines.*

"People are really dying to get connection to the Internet," said Geoffrey Wokulira Ssebaggala, Executive Director at Witnessradio.org, a not-for-profit organization to promote independent media in Uganda. He describes how eager people in Uganda are to get connected, even if only partially, such as through Facebook's free but limited internet access program internet.org.

This goes for students as well as for citizen reporters or farmers. Online, they feel connected to the world, see new ways to communicate with their friends and family, and discover new job opportunities. "The Internet is my carrier, it is part of my life", said Isaak, a researcher for the NGO World Vision. For Stella, a student at the Mbale-based Islamic University in Uganda, the Internet is a tool for knowledge. "Books are often not available," she said. "But now I can do my research on the mobile phone."

The spread of the Internet has connected remote communities to the rest of the country. Information can now flow in and out. Citizen reporters like David work as a link between online and offline communities. With his smartphone he can send informa-

tion from traditional community meetings to the local radio station. "We create a bridge between the voiceless, the public and the authorities", he said.

#### What happens next?

The Internet could be a catalyst for more participation in Uganda, but until this happens there are hurdles to be overcome. "I think we are still in the honeymoon phase," said Ssebaggala, who thinks people generally see the Internet as a place to socialize and haven't yet thought about the downsides or risks. "People don't care much about net neutrality or Internet governance and they don't see digital security as much of an issue."

Other researchers have found even more obstacles, such as a gaping digital divide characterized by low ICT access in some communities due to poverty, illiteracy, traditional cultural beliefs, and language. "Most of the content on the Internet is in English, so that leaves out a big percentage of the population and contributes to the low penetration rates", said Sarah Kiden, a researcher at the Internet Society.

<sup>26</sup> BBC Media Action; Country Case Study Uganda, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/policies/country-case-studies/africa/country-case-study-uganda>

Women are especially disadvantaged when it comes to Internet access, often due to an inability to read, according to a report<sup>27</sup> from the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET), an NGO. “One of the most pressing barriers affecting women is illiteracy. While 73 percent of the Ugandan population over the age of 15 can read or write at a basic level, literate men far outnumber literate women. 82 percent of men are literate compared with only 64 percent of women.”

Neema Iyer from the Ugandan organization “Pollicy” agrees that literacy is among the main reasons for the ICT gender gap, but another important reason is cost. Buying a mobile phone and a data package is much more than many women – especially in the villages – can afford. Then there are cultural and family as-

Five years ago, social media in Uganda was a very civil place. Now it is becoming less safe and more rude and violent,” said Iyer.

#### How can participation in society be improved?

Like Iyer, many experts see fake news and hate speech as serious problems. “People are posting things about others that are not the slightest bit true but because they have a platform that is unedited, they feel free to say these things,” said Gerald Businge Ateenyi, a journalism lecturer at Makerere University and the managing director of Ultimate Multimedia Consult.

For Stella, the student from Mbale, the way the Internet is being used these days is often harmful to young people and the society as a whole. “People adopt something they don't know about. They copy the lifestyles of celebrities, trying things which are not accepted in our culture,” she said. “It is a distraction for the youth. They should be in class but they forget about it because they are busy on their phones.” Thus, while the Internet can increase participation, it has also harm social cohesion within Ugandan society, which is still largely organized around traditional lines.

Iyer from Pollicy wonders about finding ways to use the Internet more productively and hopes there will be a push in terms of understanding the consequences of

being on the Internet in society. Richard Zulu, founder of the Kampala-based innovation hub Outbox, recommends increasing awareness around online tools and boosting digital literacy. “That would be a good starting point,” he said. Wakabi Wairagala, executive director at CIPESA, an ICT policy and advocacy think tank, emphasizes the importance of talking to multiple stakeholders on the issue of digital participation: “We also need to work with minority groups, for example with women in rural communities, on how they access information, how they use technology to demand accountability and civic participation, and how they exercise their right to freedom of expression online.”

“If people hear about internet.org people are excited and say: 'let them come, let them come, it doesn't matter we can't access the whole Internet, it is better to have some'.

Geoffrey Ssebagala, [witnessradio.org](http://witnessradio.org)

sociations, especially for married women, whose husbands are often wary of their wives having a phone or accessing the internet. This leads to a huge risk of abuse both online and offline. In a recent survey of 300 women in Kampala carried out by Pollicy, 30 percent reported that they had been victims of cyberbullying and abuse. Godiva Akullo, a Ugandan lawyer, says many women end up self-censoring<sup>28</sup> on social media in order to avoid online aggression. In fact, an Internet space which is becoming more harsh and abusive is a major challenge for all users in Uganda, not just women.

<sup>27</sup> Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET); Women's Rights and the Internet in Uganda, <http://wougnet.org/home/files/mydocs/apc-cipesa-wougnet-upr-submission-final.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> African Feminism (AF); Ugandan women carving up online spaces to impact national discourse, <https://africanfeminism.com/2016/07/25/ugandan-women-caving-up-online-spaces-to-impact-national-discourse>



## Innovation: A country in the starting blocks

*Despite serious challenges around red tape, infrastructure and poor capital flows, Uganda's government has plans to jump start the country's ICT sector. Observers say there's reason for cautious optimism.*

The government in Uganda has big ambitions for the ICT sector and wants to modernize the country's ICT programs. But entrepreneurs face significant problems around bureaucracy, poor infrastructure, and a lack of funding. At the same time, the country's young population offers enormous potential, especially in the area of digital technologies.

### Status Report

A Ugandan government report entitled "Vision 2040"<sup>29</sup> sets ambitious goals for the next two decades. It outlines a strategy that envisages "innovative start-ups growing into multi-billion-shilling ICT businesses.....creating thousands of technology jobs and greatly expanding the country's tax base".

In an article in the daily New Vision published in February 2018, Moses Watasa, the commissioner of information dissemination monitoring and inspection at the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, addressed the country's ICT future and Uganda's enormous youth population, or as he calls them, its "ICT wizards". He wrote that government initiatives will enable young people to find work and secure a future in IT. He also predicted the creation of more than two million new jobs by 2020, supported by initiatives such as the National ICT Initiatives Support Program (NIISP)<sup>30</sup>.

In addition, open data initiatives put in place by the government<sup>31</sup> are designed to provide citizens and businesses with better and faster access to government data and services, like the new eCitizen Portal<sup>32</sup>, "a one-stop online center for government online service."<sup>33</sup>

And yet, difficulties regarding access to information combined with high levels of bureaucracy and slow, cumbersome admin-

istrative procedures continue to cause significant problems for entrepreneurs and innovators in Uganda. A report on ICT investment in 2017 by the news portal enstartup, "Uganda's startup Capital"<sup>34</sup>, mourned major hindrances such as corruption, illiteracy rates, bureaucracy, and legal bottlenecks, and the fact that access to information in Uganda continues to deteriorate. The report called it a "one step forward and two steps backward kind of movement."

Financing is another problem. Richard Zulu, the founder of Outbox<sup>35</sup>, a tech incubator in Kampala, said tech startups in Uganda have a hard time finding funding, especially from sources close to home.

### What are the most important issues?

Uganda lags behind neighboring countries in terms of the number and volume of tech startups, although the trend is on the upswing. In 2017, 560 million USD in venture capital flowed to startups from Africa, according to a report from Partech Ventures<sup>36</sup>. Of this, only 16 million USD went to companies from Uganda, putting it after Rwanda (36.7 million USD), Ghana (20.4 million USD), and far behind neighboring Kenya (147 million USD). "Startups in off-grid tech/energy, fintech, and health-related sectors gave an account of the most deals in terms of value while startups in the health, agriculture and energy sectors gave an account of the most deals in numbers," the enstartup report found.

The MTN Innovation Awards<sup>37</sup> gives a good overview of what is happening in the digital economy. It was created by the largest telecom company in Uganda in 2015 to "to recognize outstanding applications developed by Ugandans as well as outstanding individuals or private organizations that are enabling the local innovation Eco-System." One example is Roundbob.com which

<sup>29</sup> New Vision; How the Ugandan govt is harnessing ICT to create wealth [https://www.newvision.co.ug/new\\_vision/news/1470365/ugandan-govt-harnessing-ict-create-wealth](https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1470365/ugandan-govt-harnessing-ict-create-wealth)

<sup>30</sup> Ministry of ICT & National Guidance: <http://niisp.ict.go.ug/about-us>

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of ICT & National Guidance; Open Data Policy <http://www.ict.go.ug/sites/default/files/Resource/Open%20Data%20Policy%20First%20Draft%20vX.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> eCitizen Portal Uganda: <http://ecitizen.go.ug/content/ecitizen-portal>

<sup>33</sup> Uganda National Information Technology Authority (NITA); Ministry of ICT and National Guidance and NITA-U release findings of National IT Survey 2017/2018, <https://www.nita.go.ug/media/ministry-ict-and-national-guidance-and-nita-u-release-findings-national-it-survey-20172018>

<sup>34</sup> enstartup: Ugandan startups raised over \$13 Million in 2017, <http://www.enstartup.com/2018/01/17/ugandan-startups-raised-13-million-2017/>

<sup>35</sup> Outbox: <https://outbox.co.ug/>

<sup>36</sup> LinkedIn; In another record-breaking year, African Tech Start-ups Raised US\$ 560 Million in VC funding in 2017, a 53% YoY Growth <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/another-record-breaking-year-african-tech-start-ups-raised-collon/>

<sup>37</sup> MTN; Innovation Awards 2017, <https://www.mtn.co.ug/en/services/value-added-services/Pages/MTN-Innovation-Awards.aspx>

was selected as “the innovation of the year”<sup>38</sup> in 2017”, that helps users access and afford travel both domestic and international.”

However, startups in the media sector are relatively absent, as is their capacity to innovate. “Media startups are almost non-existent in Uganda at present,” said Zulu.

**“Traditional media companies that have the financial resources to implement new technologies or adapt to a digital media environment still find digital innovation a challenging prospect.**

**Richard Zulu, Outbox**

A number of them have utilised social media and digital platforms such as Google, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube well, although they still spend a lot of their efforts and budget on other channels like television. This is due to the limited revenue potential on digital in such areas where the number of online users is still low. “For various reasons the amount of money you earn on air is definitely higher than what you earn in digital. That is why they focus on where the bulk of revenue comes from,” he said.

For startups in the media sector, a main challenge is financing. “You get less funding from the government and even international organisations because most people don’t see it as a priority area,” said Abaas Mpindi from the Media Challenge Initiative<sup>39</sup>, a non-profit journalist training and mentorship organization and DW Akademie partner. His Fellowship Program aims to prepare young journalists for the challenges of a digital media landscape.

#### **What happens next?**

Despite the challenges, Uganda is a country of entrepreneurs with enormous potential. In 2014, “The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM)<sup>40</sup>” saw Uganda as a country with “an abundance of willing entrepreneurs held back by limited skills and a lack of support from the government.”

Today, digitization and new funding initiatives are providing a

possible way for young, digitally oriented entrepreneurs to find a successful path forward. Because of this potential, the “Uganda’s startup Capital” report painted a positive picture of the coming years: “One sign of the expanding ecosystem is the number of new innovation spaces,” it said. Outbox, TechBuzz Hub, Design Hub, Andela and a variety of co-working spaces give entrepreneurs opportunities for creative development cooperation. The areas of energy, fintech, agriculture, transport, and health are considered particularly promising.

There are also new opportunities appearing in the field of civic tech, a sector which connects the public with government and public authorities through new digital services and open data. Pollicy, a civic technology organization focused on using technology and data to improve public service delivery in Uganda, is barely a year old but has tried to bridge the gap between civil society organisations, governments, and citizens. In November 2017 they hosted the first Data Club<sup>41</sup> in

Uganda, a quarterly meeting where representatives from the academic, technology, business, civil society, and government sectors come together in an informal atmosphere.

The Makerere University in Kampala has also set itself the goal of promoting entrepreneurs. The Makerere Innovation and Incubation Center, founded in October 2017 at the College of Computing and Information Science (COCIS), aims “to provide a vehicle for nurturing talent in product development using ICT, bridging the gap between the innovators/investors/consumers, and providing mentorship for creative developers interested in finding solutions to the many challenges faced in the country.”

#### **How can the innovation landscape be improved?**

Neema Iyer, the founder of Pollicy, hopes that the government will live up to its promises around ICT sector development. “You can only do so much as a private company,” she said. She wants it to be easier to do business by, for example, streamlining the process for acquiring work permits for investors. And for that, government intervention is essential. She would also like to see the expansion of networks where people who work in the digital sector, like coders or web designers, can exchange experiences and cooperate on new ideas and projects. Right now, digital innovation takes place predominantly in the cities, especially in the capital Kampala. “One of the things we need to work on is access,” she said. “The second thing is education.”

<sup>38</sup> Dignited; The MTN Innovation Awards 2017 full list of winners, <http://www.dignited.com/26431/mtn-innovation-awards-2017-winners>

<sup>39</sup> Media Challenge Initiative Uganda (MCI); <http://www.mciug.org>

<sup>40</sup> GEM; Country Report Uganda: <http://www.gemconsortium.org/country-profile/11>

<sup>41</sup> Pollicy; We Just Turned One!: <https://medium.com/pollicy/we-just-turned-one-31972bbe07e>