Online influence and coordinated disinformation campaigns during Kenya’s August 2022 elections highlight the threat posed to democratic institutions by weaponising digital communications. This study examines the use of social media and messaging platforms in the polls. It reveals an emerging marketplace for influence operations where hashtags and tweets carry a price tag and a vast supply of digital entrepreneurs stand ready to monetise their social networks.
Key findings

- Influence operations during Kenya’s 2022 presidential elections were largely indigenous, although they mirrored techniques used in other parts of the world. They tapped into existing fears, social cleavages and conspiracy theories based on mistrust of the state, and amplified them online.

- The elections demonstrated the “commodification” of influence – a market for hashtags and influencers for hire.

- The motivations for influence operations varied. Some ‘sold’ their influence for their own political objectives or to support other political actors. Product influencers temporarily turned towards elections during the campaigning season.

- The overwhelming driver of influence operations appeared to be commercial rather than ideological, reflecting the transactional nature of Kenyan politics. The same tools and techniques could be used by other actors such as hostile nation states, transnational criminal networks and terrorist organisations.

- Fragile democracies, in which checks and balances are weak, are vulnerable information environments where influence operations can thrive.

- The prospect of scaling up automated responses using artificial intelligence represents an information ecosystem where speed is king. Increased automation could outpace human ability to verify information, leading to a potential automated disinformation arms race in which Africa is vulnerable.

Recommendations

- Legacy media houses need to position themselves as ‘centres of truth’ where people can find credible information. This will require an online and offline presence to maximise reach to Kenya’s digitally connected and digitally deprived communities.

- Media houses must be made aware of the consequences of inadvertently amplifying content online. Editors need to instil a culture of professionalism that discourages moonlighting between blogging, selling influence and serving as a journalist with an accredited media organisation.

- Communicators from Kenyan government institutions must be prepared to quickly deploy counternarratives in order to offset disinformation, ‘set the record straight’ and develop strong ties with legacy media.

- Kenyan and international policymakers should be alive to the tactics observed in Kenya’s August 2022 elections being replicated elsewhere.

- The expertise in Kenya’s technology sector should be harnessed in a coordinated way to help counter toxic narratives online.

- The possibility of Kenya outsourcing its own influence expertise to other actors should be monitored by researchers. Kenya’s position as a recipient of influence tactics from external actors, including nation states, transnational criminal networks and terrorist organisations should also be studied.

- Researchers should monitor the range of tools, including sophisticated ‘deep fakes’ and other artificial intelligence tools, that influence merchants use in future elections in Kenya and across Africa. This data should form the basis of a public information campaign to build resilience among African citizens.
Introduction

This study examines the digital information ecosystem in Kenya during the August 2022 election campaigning season and polls and immediate aftermath. It seeks to understand the key actors involved in influence campaigns and disinformation. It sheds light on the primary influence communities and how they interact and amplify messages using various techniques to maximise reach.

Using data analytics and network analysis, researchers demonstrated how influence networks use their agency to create and amplify narratives through both real and inauthentic (fake) means, and to react to pre-existing narratives or real-world events. While the use of disinformation techniques such as deep and cheap fakes are among the methods detected by our analytics, the primary focus of this study is on influence operations and how they shape or challenge the democratic status quo.

Influence networks create and amplify narratives through real and fake means, and react to real-world events

While the first part of the study focuses on a detailed analysis of the influence networks and communities, the second part examines in greater detail the actors, their motives and behaviour, and the key narratives associated with them. It assesses the impact on democratic institutions and in particular the impact of influence operations on checks and balances that divide party and state – a foundational principle of democracies.

The study highlights the challenges posed to legacy (traditional) media, which increasingly finds itself in direct competition with social media platforms. Furthermore, it assesses the impact of the rapid proliferation of social media platforms on real-world events and governance. It gives examples of influence operations that show characteristics of digital vigilantism that have the potential to stimulate offline action.¹

The report considers the future impact influence operations enhanced by powerful artificial intelligence (AI) technologies may have on fragile democracies. Lessons learnt from Kenya may be applied to other nation states, to help policymakers understand and develop resilience to influence operations, which have the potential to undermine democratic norms.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed methodological approach to identify the primary influence communities and key influencers associated with Kenya’s August 2022 election. Data analysis was undertaken using a team of technical consultants to conduct a network analysis of the key influence communities to provide a macro picture of the information ecosystem.

This formed the basis for the second phase of the study, which used open source investigative techniques (OSINT) and in-person interviews to identify some of the key influence actors. The research sought to understand their behaviour, motives and narratives and shed light on the information ecosystem during the August 2022 election.

The two primary platforms examined for this study were Facebook and Twitter, with further contextual analysis provided by a manual search of platforms including TikTok and Instagram. A third-party service provider, Botometer, was used to sample users from the top communities to analyse the quality of the accounts. Quality is defined across a variety of dimensions including fake followers, spamming and astroturfing (i.e. using their follower network for coordinated activity).

A number of low-quality accounts were identified. However, these appear to have been spread across the communities of interest for both sides of the political contest, suggesting they were using similar techniques.

The findings of this report have been peer-reviewed by numerous researchers working in similar fields. An important caveat to consider is that the social media platforms on which this study is based are constantly changing. Although this phenomenon did not appear to affect this study, this along with the increasing use of dark social platforms and encrypted platforms may impact future research.
Kenya’s elections and the story of influence

Kenya’s August 2022 elections, particularly the presidential polls, represented a highly contested race between then deputy president William Ruto and his Kenya Kwanza coalition and long-time political hopeful Raila Odinga, represented by the Azimio la Umoja alliance.

A widely reported pact or ‘handshake’ in March 2018 between former rivals Odinga and then president Uhuru Kenyatta signalled an era of elite cooperation and a truce between ethnic communities that were traditionally pitted against each other during polls. It also fuelled the narrative that was to characterise Ruto’s class-based election campaign. The pact was framed by Ruto as a political betrayal. Thus the campaign crafted by his Kenya Kwanza coalition pitted ordinary working Kenyans or ‘hustlers’, whom Ruto claimed to represent, with dynasty politics represented by both Kenyatta and Odinga – both scions of Kenya’s independence leaders.

Impact of platform changes on OSINT investigations

Open source investigations conducted on social media platforms are inherently reliant on the integrity and accessibility of the platform being investigated. Some platforms (such as Gab and Parler) take specific steps to prevent open source investigations from being conducted on its users by limiting search functions and the ability to programmaticallly access the data on their users and their interactions. However, a less cynical implication is that even benign steps taken by social media platforms to enhance the user experience or address security concerns can sometimes impact the type and nature of evidence available for collection.

The clearest example of this was the removal of Facebook’s Graph Search feature in mid-2018. At the time, Graph Search allowed OSINT investigators to find information on people of interest even when this information was not published by them. For example, if a user made their profile private, Graph Search would still allow researchers to identify posts in which that person was tagged, or photos in which they may have appeared but were uploaded by different users. The removal of Graph Search had a major impact on Facebook-centred investigations. Subsequently other less robust tools have been used to conduct such investigations.

As a result, the findings of an open source investigation hinges on the platform being investigated maintaining the access to its data in such a way that it is accessible, replicable and verifiable.

Impact of Twitter’s new direction on API access

Twitter has long been one of the most open social media platforms when it comes to data access, and this is one of the reasons that much research on influence operations is conducted on the platform. However this changed on 9 February 2023 after Twitter’s CEO announced that free access to the application programming interface (API) would be suspended. In practice, this means individual researchers, journalists and students who have used Twitter’s API to identify and research influencer operations will no longer have access to this data. Larger data aggregation companies and market/branding platforms may be affected, depending on how they collect their content from Twitter interactions.

At the time of this study’s publication, there were still no details of the cost implications of this move. It will probably have less impact on market analytics firms, who will be keen to pay to keep their service offering intact. But smaller entities such as students, journalists and civil society organisations will struggle to justify the costs of what has until now been freely accessible. Many of the free tools available online to conduct analysis of accounts are also compromised as a result, and many (if not most) of these are expected to shut down.

With respect to this study, historic data was collected before changes were implemented. However, any new data requested or collected from 9 February 2023 onwards bears an additional cost implication.
Official results released by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) on 15 August 2022 stated that Ruto won 50.5% of the vote and Odinga secured 48.8%. Following a legal challenge a week later by Odinga’s Azimio la Umoja coalition, the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the IEBC’s official results a month after the election. At the time Odinga said although he disagreed with the outcome, he would abide by the decision. This was widely interpreted to be a sign of a strengthening judiciary and respect for the rule of law, in a country with a troubled history of election violence.

However, until 1 April 2023, Odinga loyalists were engaged in regular weekly demonstrations challenging the legitimacy of the Ruto administration and the cost of living. The protests, marred by violence, were suspended as a result of an agreement to consider reforms to the electoral commission.

Aides close to Ruto said their concerns of bias in the legacy media motivated them to compete aggressively with their rivals on digital platforms.

Media coverage of the election campaign season was energetic. However legacy (traditional) media struggled to dominate the information environment due to perceptions of bias, based on a history of highly politicised ownership patterns in Kenya and a reduction in advertising revenue, which impacted their operations. Aides close to Ruto told researchers during interviews for this study that their concerns of bias in the media motivated them to compete aggressively with their rivals on digital platforms. ‘Azimio knew that this election was going to be won on tech,’ the aide said and ‘that was what was available to us.’

John-Allan Namu from the investigative journalism platform Africa Uncensored told researchers for this study that legacy media seemed to find itself in direct competition with social media platforms. ‘The money followed the growth of digital media and in 2021 the digital spends surpassed spends on legacy media in Kenya.’

Social media platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram, along with messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, became the dominant vectors through which election news and disinformation were transmitted during Kenya’s election. As studies have indicated, social media participation in elections across Africa is increasing, and is both emancipating and destructive.

Kenyan engagement on social media platforms is one of the highest on the continent. Previous Institute for Security Studies research has shown how social media can be a useful tool to hold power to account in Kenya. This happened for example with reported extrajudicial violence conducted by the security services in which alleged police transgressions were called out by social media communities.
This study shows that during elections, however, information on social media was weaponised by all sides. Researchers found that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provided important vehicles through which official and unofficial messages from candidates, their official teams, their proxies and supporters were conveyed.

Furthermore, influence entrepreneurship was clearly observed during the August 2022 election, and continues. Influencers – those deemed to have a high level of exposure to online audiences – calibrate their reach depending on context. For example, product influencers instrumentalised their influence or followings to support one candidate over another.

Political influencers capitalised on their following to elevate specific candidates and narratives. One such influencer, a senior digital strategist for Ruto’s campaign, was arguably the most prominent political influencer during the entire election campaign and has maintained a large following outside of election time. His Twitter account was second in ranking below the president’s (which he almost certainly ran as well), according to an analysis for this study.

Once elected to the Presidency, this individual remained a key vehicle through which the president’s state engagements were articulated online. It was only in February 2023 that media reports surfaced that this influencer was being considered for a formal government role. At the time of writing, he continues to occupy an ambiguous and powerful role, which blurs the division between party and state.

Chart 1: Examples of antagonistic interactions with traditional (legacy) media

Source: ISS study

Part I: Kenya’s key influence communities

In the initial phase of the study, we conducted a detailed technical analysis of the two most prominent platforms in Kenya – Facebook and Twitter – in order to understand the key influence communities and their interactions online. Between June 2022 and October 2022, a total of 7 487 879 documents from Twitter were sampled. Between August and September 2022, 406 754 documents from Facebook were sampled.

On Twitter, the discussion around Kenya’s 2022 presidential election consisted of three main communities: the William Ruto community; pro-Ruto influencers and mainstream media; and the Raila Odinga community. There were also numerous smaller communities – for example the Kenyan elections were of great interest to commentators from Nigeria, Uganda and Ethiopia’s Tigrayan community, among others. Their volumes however were not significantly high as to suggest external influence tactics, and they assumed the character of observers.

The IEBC community was pulled into Odinga’s community due to the Supreme Court challenge following contestation of the official results. The mainstream media was pulled into the pro-Ruto community as key influencers responded with antagonistic interactions between this community and the media (Chart 1). Media content was often commentated on and reinterpreted by this community, who saw legacy media as pro-Odinga and his ally Kenyatta.
Chart 2 illustrates a story of two communities who drove the electoral discussion online using a series of generic hashtags including #KenyaDecides2022, #KenyaPoll, etc.

For the Ruto community, narratives were driven by top influencers. @Williamsruto’s (the main handle for this group) dominated conversations while a series of high-profile influencers with both an offline and online presence supported it using both customised and generic election hashtags.

For the Odinga community, narratives were driven by top influencers. Content from Odinga’s official account @railaodinga dominated in this community followed by his running mate Martha Karua @marthakarua and a host of influencers who used numerous online aliases.

Disinformation narratives and fake news

There were many disinformation narratives that circulated during the election campaign season, some of which used deep and cheap fakes or altered video. The aim was to sow ethnic division, discredit electoral institutions and mislead readers regarding political endorsements, or voter suppression – i.e. encouraging voters to stay away.

Two of the most prominent fake news stories concerned a doctored video that purported to show former United States (US) president Barack Obama endorsing a Kenyan presidential candidate. The video clip was in fact taken from a speech Obama had made several years earlier. It was labelled fake by fact-checking organisations, many of them based in Kenya (Chart 3).
These organisations had gone to considerable effort to educate Kenya’s social media-consuming public regarding the possibility of fake or doctored content in the months leading up to election day.

A second fake story aimed at voter suppression sought to frighten potential voters off in a key election battleground in the Mount Kenya area, by claiming that the Kenya Wildlife Service had warned of a leopard on the loose. The original content was labelled as fake by fact-checking organisations.

While these were crude attempts at distorting reality, other influence narratives received more attention for extended periods and reflected a global trend towards influence by gaming algorithms and building on networks.

Overall, the volumes of overt disinformation attempts were low given the eight million tweets analysed for this study. Where disinformation was present, it was overwhelmingly mentioned across the three primary communities of interest. The pro-Ruto influencers and mainstream media community (which contains many media houses as well as pro-Ruto influencers) were by far the main vectors for such topics. Many of these mentions though were due to media coverage of these topics highlighting the role of the media as an inadvertent amplifier or ‘useful idiot’ – a term used by data analytics practitioners – when popularising these contentious topics.

### Defining inauthentic activity

Data analytics showed relatively high Botometer scores in the communities we examined. The Botometer tool flags inauthentic behaviour by bots. However, each community appeared to employ similar inauthentic activity to succeed. Accounts masquerading as individuals were common. Although Kenya has a rich history of satire online, with well-established satirists such as Patrick Gathara using the genre to help hold power to account, impersonation accounts were seen during the election.

Astroturfing was also observed across the communities of interest. Astroturfing is an activity influence merchants use to sell access to their highly curated, inter-connected and coordinated network to achieve some campaign goal.
Russia’s war in Ukraine was into its sixth month at the time Kenyans went to the polls in August 2022. Although overall foreign mentions were low, Russian mentions dominated this narrative, partly because of the impact on food security both globally and in Kenya.

During the period of this study, media reports surfaced of an Israeli-led operation selling influence services in Kenya.14 Senior executives claimed to undercover reporters that they could hack into the Telegram account of a key influencer from William Ruto’s team. It’s also reported that they claimed they could hack into Kenya’s election servers. The company owners bragged that they had an AI system called AIMS that could create thousands of fake online profiles, suggesting the potential to influence elections on an industrial scale. Although Raila Odinga admitted in a press interview that he had used ethical hackers15 from overseas to assist his campaign, the impact of any foreign influence operations would appear to have been limited.

Furthermore, some reports in the Kenyan legacy media focused on allegations of other forms of foreign influence ranging from the US, China, India and Venezuela. Given Kenya’s experience of attempts to sway elections by the now defunct company Cambridge Analytica,16 suggestions of foreign influence fall on fertile ground.

However, this research strongly indicates that the predominant form of influence during the August 2022 election was home-grown, although the tactics used by influencers emulate those from other settings including the US, Russia and Europe.
Part II: Kenya’s influence actors

While the first part of this study examined the communities and the macro level of online activity during Kenya’s August 2022 elections, this section examines the actors. In order to understand who the actors were, their behaviour, motivations and modes of engagement, researchers used open source investigation techniques supported by in-person and online interviews to provide detailed context and analysis.

Prominent actors in the context of this study were selected based on the actual or perceived influence that the account displays, both on social media platforms as well as real-world engagements. Political strategists, policymakers and journalists fall into this category of people, and social media influencers and prominent digital marketers would also be included based on their social profiles.

Although the three case studies selected for this report are well-known influencers who use multiple aliases as part of their modus operandi, their names have been redacted in order to focus on their behaviour.

Mechanics of manipulation

On social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, actions taken by users can amplify narratives at scale and at speed. The fact that algorithms prioritise popular and engaging content means that intrepid users can manipulate (or game) these algorithms in ways that provide an advantage during the course of a social media campaign.

These deceptive tactics assume many forms, but share a common goal: to influence public opinion or behaviour on social media platforms. There are various on-platform elements that form part of the manipulation of social media, including:

- **Bots:** Automated social media accounts that can be programmatically instructed to post content, like or retweet posts, or take other actions based on a set of predefined scripts or parameters. They can be used to artificially inflate the popularity of certain posts, hashtags or accounts and create the illusion of support or opposition for a particular issue or person.
- **Sock puppets:** Social media accounts that are created using false identities or information, and purport to be something or someone they are not. They can be used to amplify certain posts, hashtags or accounts, or to attack or discredit opponents.
- **Trolls:** Social media accounts that post comments or content that support a particular viewpoint or agenda in a way that dissuades other users from engaging. They are most often used to attack opponents and detractors, and engage in bad faith in an attempt to distract, dismay or delegitimize other users on the platform.
- **Followers/friends:** Social media users that have subscribed to a particular user’s posts in the case of Twitter, or that have mutually agreed to be friends in the case of Facebook. Following an account means you will be served their tweets, retweets and in some cases replies, on your timeline. Similarly, being friends on Facebook ensures that you have access to that user’s status updates and shares on your personal timeline. The more followers or friends an account has, the more people will see their tweets, retweets and replies on their respective timelines.
- **Following:** An account’s following is closely tied to the number of followers and friends the account has. This is often seen as the ‘reach’ of the account, as it is a numeric indication of the number of other users that have opted to view the account’s social media posts. As a result, it is often used as a proxy for ‘influence’. The higher the following of an account, the more users it can reach, and the more influence it can wield on the perceptions of people engaging with its posts. A large following is a sought-after characteristic on social media platforms, to the extent that some individuals employ inauthentic means in an attempt to boost their follower numbers.

Although a platform such as Twitter has fewer overall users than Facebook, Instagram or TikTok, it remains a virtual town square with prominent individuals (including journalists, politicians and decision makers) who are active on the platform. As a result, social media manipulation targeting its users can be a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and behaviour. Understanding these techniques and mechanics, and the manner in which they manifest, is key in understanding the information environment.
Engagement techniques on Twitter: key terms

On Twitter, engagement is one of the factors that drive algorithmic preferencing. For example, a viral tweet with many retweets, replies and likes would have a much higher probability of being included on the timelines of other users. The same principle applies to hashtags.

Engagement on Twitter refers to any interaction a user has with a tweet, hashtag or other user on the platform.

This engagement takes on several different forms, each of which carries with it an ‘engagement value’ based on the effort of engagement and amplification that it affords:

• **Likes**: Likes, also known as favourites, are a way for users to show appreciation for a tweet without leaving a comment. Users can like a tweet by clicking on the heart icon below the tweet. Due to the low-effort nature of this type of engagement, and the fact that it isn’t readily visible or apparent to the followers of the account performing the like, it is considered on the lower end of the amplification scale.

• **Retweets**: Retweets are a way for users to share someone else’s tweet with their own followers. When a user retweets a tweet, the original tweet is displayed on their profile with a note that it was retweeted by the user. Retweets have increased engagement value considering that they’re shared with the followers of the account performing the retweet, even if they do not follow the original poster directly.

• **Replies**: Replies are comments that users leave on a tweet. They can be used to start a conversation or to respond to someone else’s comment. When a user replies to a tweet, their comment is displayed below the original tweet. This sits roughly on par with the engagement value of a retweet, as there is increased effort to engage (by typing out a reply, instead of tapping retweet) but the reply is not as readily visible to the follower of the account posting the reply.

• **Quotes**: Quotes are a way for a user to share someone else’s tweet while at the same time providing their own comment or response to it. This is a combination of a reply and a retweet, in that it shares the original tweet as well as the responder’s comment to that. In terms of engagement, this vests at the pinnacle – it not only amplifies the original tweet, but also shows the quoting user’s engagement efforts to all of their followers.

In addition to these engagement options, other notable characteristics of the Twitter ecosystem should be noted:

• **Mentions**: Mentions are a way for users to tag other users in a tweet. When a user mentions another user, the tagged user will receive a notification and can choose to reply or engage in the conversation. Mentions can take place in original posts, in quote tweets or in replies.

• **Hashtags**: Hashtags are keywords or phrases preceded by the hash (#) symbols that are used to categorise tweets within a specific topic, and make them easier to find. Users can search for tweets with a specific hashtag or use hashtags in their own tweets to join a conversation or start a new one. Hashtags are often used to make specific topics ‘trend’ through their association with tweets discussing the topic.

• **Direct messages**: Direct messages, also known as DMs, are private messages users can send to each other on Twitter. They are only visible to the sender and the recipient and can be used for private conversations or to share information that is not meant for public consumption. As a result, DMs hold no amplification value.

Overall, these different forms of engagement on Twitter provide users with various ways to interact with each other, share information, and express themselves on the platform.
Similar to Twitter, the engagements on a particular status update or post drive algorithmic amplification. However, the nature of Facebook’s engagements differ in one material respect.

On Twitter, account follows are unilateral actions. Unless a user specifically blocks another account from following their profile, there is no further action required from the account being followed once another user begins to follow them. Conversely, most Facebook profiles require a user to accept a ‘friend request’ before the establishment of this bidirectional relationship. Some profiles can allow users to ‘follow’ their status updates in a similar way to Twitter accounts, but these are not the norm.

As a result, most status updates, posts or replies are shown to a smaller, more intimate group of friends, as opposed to the public square that Twitter represents. This is also evident from the friend/follower limits – Facebook limits users to 5,000 friends, whereas Twitter places no limit on the number of followers an account may have. One way to circumvent these limits is through using Facebook groups and pages. These virtual meeting places have no limits on the number of members, and members can post content to the group for other members to see.

Facebook has its own set of structures or elements for users to engage with on the platform, including:

- **Facebook profile**: This is the most basic construct on Facebook and is essentially your personal account on the platform. Your profile includes your name, profile picture, cover photo, and other information about you. You can add friends, share posts, photos, and videos, and communicate with others through messages.

- **Facebook groups**: Groups are a way for people with similar interests to come together to discuss topics, share content, and organise events. Groups can be public, private, or secret, and they can be created by anyone. Group members can post updates, photos, and videos, as well as participate in discussions and polls.

- **Facebook pages**: Pages are similar to profiles, but are meant for businesses, organisations, public figures, and other entities. Pages can be used to promote a brand, share information, and engage with followers. Page owners can post updates, photos, and videos, and interact with their audience through comments and messages.

In order to engage on any of these channels, a user will use one of a number of engagement options, which range from a simple ‘like’ on a post to sharing the content or tagging other users.

- **Like/reaction**: A like is the most common, and lowest-effort, type of engagement on Facebook, where users can simply click the ‘like’ button on a post to show their appreciation or agreement. In addition to simply clicking the ‘like’ button, users can react to a post with emojis such as ‘love’, ‘haha’, ‘wow’, ‘sad’ or ‘angry’. This allows them to express a more nuanced response to the post. Reactions can also be used on comments/replies to the post itself.

- **Comment/reply**: A comment or reply is a response to another user’s posted content, and is used to express the thoughts or opinions on what has been said. They can also reply to other comments to continue a threaded conversation outside of the main body of replies. This requires additional effort from the user.

- **Share**: Sharing a post will display the shared post on their own timeline, on a friend’s timeline, in a group, or on a page, depending on how the post was shared. This allows them to share interesting content with their network and expand its reach. This is often used in conjunction with groups or pages to help the user reach audiences outside of their immediate circle of friends.

- **Tagging**: Tagging entails appending the profile of a person, page, or group in a post or comment to notify them and increase the visibility of the post.
Techniques to manipulate narratives and trick the social media's algorithm

• **Astroturfing:** Astroturfing refers to the practice of creating fake grassroots movements or organisations to create the appearance of popular support for a particular cause or issue. In many cases, sock puppets are used to amplify and populate such astroturfing movements.

• **Inauthentic amplification:** Inauthentic amplification involves using social media to promote a particular message or agenda through likes, retweets, shares, and other forms of engagement using techniques or tactics that are deceptive. It is often used to create the appearance of popular consensus for a specific topic, or to drown out opposing views. It is also often conducted in a coordinated fashion.

• **Disinformation:** Disinformation involves the intentional spreading of false or misleading information to influence public opinion or behaviour. It can be used to create confusion, sow discord, or advance a particular agenda, and is often deployed using an array of sock puppets, bots and astroturfing operations.

• **Follow trains:** Follow trains are a deceptive follower-boosting technique in which the accounts that participate follow each other in a transactional arrangement to boost their mutual follower numbers. This provides the illusion of high-follower numbers for both accounts, which these accounts then market as their potential reach.

• **Trend manipulation:** Algorithmic gaming entails the coordinated abuse of a social media platform’s algorithms to create the impression that the narrative, post or content is of a trending nature. This most often entails a small, coordinated network of accounts that engage in high volumes during hours when few users are online. This behaviour tricks the algorithm into assigning it a higher priority on user timelines, exposing regular users to the same narratives and driving up traffic.

• **Coordinated link sharing:** Coordinated link sharing behaviour consists of multiple social media accounts sharing links to off-platform content in a coordinated manner. This is especially prevalent on public Facebook groups and pages, where accounts can reach audiences that are not composed of their usual friendship circles.

• **Hashjacking:** Hashjacking is the use of unrelated, but popular or trending, hashtags on a tweet or post in order to capitalise on the increased exposure awarded to such a hashtag.

Kenya represents a growing market for online influence for both commercial and political purposes which appears to have expanded significantly since the 2017 presidential election. A prominent influencer for Odinga’s Azimio la Umoja coalition who was interviewed for this paper shed light on the dynamics and transactional nature of this market. He said depending on the circumstances and timing, generating a hashtag could cost a client anywhere from 100 000 Ksh to millions of shillings (US$770 to over US$7 000).

The claim was verified by African Uncensored’s Namu,17 who observed that influence was ‘tiered’ such that individuals lending their influence to an election campaign could earn around US$1 000–US$2 000 per tweet. Mid-tier bloggers or video bloggers (vloggers) with about 10 000–40 000 followers ‘can charge anything from US$500 to US$1 000 per day for a series of disinformation tweets, so could easily make upwards of US$2 000–US$3 000 a day’ if they are tweeting energetically.

This concept of ‘influence’ attached to the number of followers of a social media account has also created a market for users to sell their high-follower accounts to others seeking to monetise them. The process is straightforward. Create an account, curate an audience with viral and engaging tweets, and then sell the account, followers in tow, to whomever is interested in the followers.

While this is against most social media platforms’ terms of service, in most instances it’s a difficult scenario to investigate and take enforcement action against.

Determining the motivation for influence is not an exact science. Some cases are clear – an official ensconced in the ruling party would have political reasons to promote
its preferred candidate, and paid marketers wield their influence for money. But determining the intention behind an individual account’s actions online relies on examining their behaviour. Broadly, these engagements fall into one or more of three broad categories:

- **Political motivations:** Where political motivations are the main driver behind an account’s actions, narratives are distributed or promoted to sway other users to change their way of thinking around specific ideologies, people and topics. While there is no direct financial incentive driving the actions of these accounts, secondary monetary considerations resulting from a successful political campaign may also be at play.

- **Commercial motivations:** Financial or commercial motivations may also be directly responsible for the propagation of a narrative by an account. This is most often seen with social media influencers who wield their following as a monetisable resource by selling the number of their followers as a proxy for their influence or reach. As a result, high-follower accounts are able to market and monetise their follower numbers to third parties on a transactional basis. This emphasis on follower numbers is also the cause of the ‘follow train’ behaviour seen during the research.

- **Amusement and recreational motivations:** In some cases, a narrative can be pushed or pursued for recreational or amusement reasons. Satire, parody and similarly nuanced humour can often be misconstrued as disinformation on social media platforms, and some users actively exploit this confusion. Still others knowingly share false narratives as a form of inside joke with themselves, deriving amusement out of the confusion of others.

Chart 5 shows a breakdown of the cohort of 23 notable accounts we identified. Each account has been assigned a number and their motivation is classified as financial, political or recreational.

**Overview: actors and narratives**

The influence actors online are a mix of political strategists, or loyal followers of a particular presidential candidate or political party. They may also include prominent bloggers or journalists who pivot away from official legacy media posts to articulate their own views or those of people who have commissioned influence as a service.

In Kenya, product influencers are growing in prominence and played an important role as amplifiers of the August 2022 elections. Product influencers include firstly individuals who might use their influence and presence online to sell merchandise or commercial services, but could temporarily venture into the political realm and amplify party narratives. Secondly, people who may promote both political narratives and engage in product influencing simultaneously by building on pre-existing networks. Many of them run teams of online ‘foot soldiers’ who amplify narratives in a coordinated way through multiple accounts.

**Narratives**

In addition to overtly supporting a particular presidential candidate or party during the August 2022 elections, there were common narratives used by key influencers to build a sense of community online, nurture common values or share a sense of mistrust in state institutions or ‘the other side’. Given that Odinga was supported by then president Kenyatta and was characterised by Ruto’s Kenya Kwanza campaign as a beneficiary of...
‘dynasty politics’, narratives amplifying mistrust of the state were framed as an attack on Odinga’s Azimio la Umoja coalition.

Although Ruto had an official state role as Kenya’s deputy president under Kenyatta, a very public fallout emerged in 2017. Ruto’s energy shifted dramatically towards securing the position of Kenya’s next president and distancing himself from the state. Kenyatta’s endorsement of Odinga as his potential successor was considered a major betrayal by Ruto.

Likewise, Azimio la Umoja sought to present Ruto’s Kenya Kwanza coalition as anti-democratic and intent on rigging the election. This is a narrative that has continued many months since the Supreme Court upheld the IEBC’s official results. Weekly real-world protests by Odinga’s followers have sought to sustain this narrative both on- and offline.

**Deep state narrative**

The deep state narrative in the Kenyan context is a conspiratorial narrative that depicts a state under the Kenyatta administration as being corrupt and lacking in accountability. It has echoes of the American QAnon conspiracy movement, which believes a clandestine group of powerful individuals operate a parallel government as the real centre of power. They believe most real-world events, especially those based on democratic norms, are merely puppet-play intended to appease the masses into cooperation.

In Kenya this narrative predated the 2022 elections. It began to gain prominence in what became known as the handshake or truce in 2018 between Odinga and then president Kenyatta, and is anchored in the politics of division. According to retired Chief Justice Willy Mutunga, who was interviewed for this study, the deep state narrative is “founded on the myth that the engine that drives the government is the national intelligence service. In the case of Kenyan politics it is controlled by the big five communities and alliances across them. Therefore, the deep state is not an engine of government as it has in fact been captured, but it is a way of William Ruto saying, “It’s nothing to do with me …”.”

**Chart 6: Example of deep state narrative posts**

HNB is working on information that Deep State & system has planned to rigged Election in Chuka,Tharaka Nithi Counties in favour of Azimio Candidates.same case where Kirinyaga GVN Ballot Thanks to Members of Public for alerting #IEBC. Nobody will steal votes for Dr William Ruto.

The die is cast...Final result is 52% for Dp Ruto and 47% for Raila. Deep state (ICT spannerboy) with the help IBU and a CHINESE ICT Govt contractor are creating a false narrative that Hon Raila has 6.832 m votes and DP Ruto has 6.716 m votes...yet 💯 of form 34A are available!

The fake narrative by the media, opinion polls and the deep state that Raila Odinga is ahead is likely to cause violence in Kisumu. The US intelligence has already warned its citizens not to travel to the lakeside city.
The deep state narrative, which opposes the idea of the common people or ‘hustlers’ as characterised by Ruto’s campaign, was quietly dropped by senior figures in the Ruto campaign when he was sworn in as president. Close aides of the president conceded to researchers for this study that the deep state narrative no longer served its purpose.

Mistrust of traditional media narrative

Mistrust of traditional or legacy media was also a prominent narrative during the election campaign. Kenya’s media landscape reflects the ownership of key media houses by political players which in turn provide or deny access to advertising slots. The perception that most Kenyan newspapers and television and radio stations are owned by pro-Kenyatta businessmen has led to accusations of bias. Ruto’s team told researchers that they struggled for permission to place adverts in traditional media and so focused their efforts on social media.

This has further led some politicians to question editorial independence. This despite arguments to the contrary by figures such as Nation Media Group managing editor Linus Kaikai, who was interviewed for this study.

A broad mistrust of legacy media was a key narrative adopted by Ruto’s campaign.

Retired Chief Justice Mutunga pondered whether such ownership issues would be replicated on social media. With the spectre of influence platforms created to push certain positions, ‘We have to watch how the same interests control social media as well as look out for foreign interests, political interests and business interests.’

Mistrust of election institutions narrative – the captured IEBC

The IEBC was the focus of narratives by both the pro-Ruto and pro-Odinga communities, although the emphasis on this narrative for each community shifted during the course of the campaign season and election aftermath. The shifting sands reflected what many considered to be a politicised body. A clear rift in the IEBC emerged when four election commissioners refused to support the chair’s decision of who had won the presidential vote before it was announced. This public dissent served to undermine the legitimacy of the IEBC.21

The Ruto community characterised a divided IEBC as akin to a coup and amplified messages that claimed to...
have evidence of Odinga’s side plotting violence during this time. This was a clear example of digital vigilantism, and in the extreme could be characterised as a false flag event, giving political elites a potential pre-text for a more authoritarian style of government in the interest of national security.

The Ruto community sought to counter the ‘real results’ narrative by simultaneously propagating narratives about an alleged plot to assassinate the chair of the election commission. This is consistent with elections in the past where each side has accused the other of meddling in election processes. However, the amplification of such narratives online has enabled them to reach a far greater audience. They also have the potential to create real-world responses.

Mistrust or conspiracy theories about external actors

Kenya has experience of external actors seeking to sway elections. The activities of Cambridge Analytica, now defunct, have been widely documented, and so narratives based on mistrust of foreign actors were to be expected in the August 2022 elections. Although numerous events, including the apparent murder of Pakistani journalist Arshad Sharif in Nairobi, led to conspiracy theories suggesting foreign (in this case British) involvement, the narrative didn’t seem directly linked to the Kenyan election. And in terms of volume of foreign country mentions, this narrative wasn’t hugely significant, according to the data captured for this research. Furthermore, a second narrative concerning the apparent murder of two Indian nationals shortly before the election, who it’s claimed had offered to help Dennis Itumbi, Ruto’s digital strategist, with some campaign ideas, gained a small amount of traction. But as with the case above, the overall volumes were low.

Additionally, Ruto’s community briefly sought to raise doubts about the motives of a US-registered NGO, Vanguard Africa – which positions itself as a pro-democracy not-for-profit organisation that ‘supports free and fair elections’. Vanguard Africa appeared to support Odinga loyalists’ position that an investigation revealed that the election had been stolen. However, in newspaper articles Vanguard Africa indicated that what Odinga
claimed were ‘real results’ may not have been enough to influence the outcome.\(^\text{29}\)

The Ruto influence community sought to portray Vanguard’s CEO Jeffrey Smith, who was also an election observer, as a foreign Odinga strategist – a position that Vanguard Africa disputes. Although it plays into the ‘external actors’ narrative, the mentions were not hugely significant, according to the data captured for this research.

**Russian narratives**

As the Kenyan election took place during the protracted conflict between Russia and Ukraine, it was expected that some Russia-Ukraine mentions would surface in the study’s data analytics. Overall volumes, however, were low. Russia-focused narratives largely concerned President Vladimir Putin’s message of congratulations to Ruto on winning the presidency and the impact of global food insecurity due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

One story that was prominent on social media claimed that Kenya was selling fertiliser donated by a Russian company as part of its subsidy to farmers. But this was found to be fake. It was based on a fictitious press release purporting to have been penned by the ‘donor’ – the Russian company Uralkem. Rather than highlighting alleged Russian influence (Russia is on record as pledging fertiliser subsidies to Africa), this was an attempt to highlight a corruption narrative, aimed at the new administration of Ruto, rather than a foreign influence narrative. The fact-checking organisation Africa Check provides a detailed explanation of this attempt to amplify a distorted narrative.\(^\text{30}\)

Many narratives had a limited lifespan and aimed to amplify a position at a particular moment in time.

Many of the narratives identified in this research have a limited lifespan and are designed to amplify a polarised position at a particular moment in time. They serve as a rallying call for like-minded individuals to coalesce around a particular theme, and at moments may simply act as a “code word” for a particular world view, or as an instrument to boost an influencer’s network.
Case studies

Researchers identified a number of case studies to illustrate a range of influence activities. Although some of the case studies are well-known individuals both online and offline in Kenya, as mentioned previously, their names have been redacted as it is their activities – not their identities – that form the basis of this study.

Case study – Influencer 1

“We knew that this election was going to be won on tech”

Influencer 1 was one of the most prominent influencers in Kenyan politics. This individual positions himself online as a ‘former international journalist’ who is disillusioned with mainstream media and offers an alternative depiction of events, possibly inspired by the ‘alternative facts’ narrative of the US.

He commands a significant following across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, and has a sophisticated technical knowledge of the power of social media and algorithms to maximise reach. Using the application TruthNest, we established that during the three-month period before, during and after the Kenya elections, this individual had a reach of some two million followers on Twitter. Sixty-one percent of his Tweets were self-generated rather than retweets – an indication that he was originating narratives. His main Facebook profile shows some 24,000 friends.

He is prominent both online and offline and was able to enhance his footprint on social media both by generating his own posts and interacting (often in an antagonistic way) with legacy media, who by simply mentioning him, amplified his reach. This influencer operates a number of aliases which serve to broaden his reach and at times evade content moderation measures.

Influencer 1 ranks second only to the official Twitter handle of William Ruto on a list of top influencers in the Ruto community.

Although considered Ruto’s digital strategist and a party loyalist during the elections, Influencer 1 at the time of writing held no official government post in the Ruto administration. Analysis of this influencer’s tweets shows that he de facto acts as the president’s spokesman, thus blurring the distinction between party and state. Namu from Africa Uncensored told this study’s researchers that Influencer 1 ‘became very very influential not only during public facing communications and propaganda but also in terms of subterfuge.’

Operating in the shadows between politics and government, although not unique to Kenyan politics, Namu argues, presents a challenge to accountability through the usual democratic channels of oversight committees etc. Plausible deniability has become a hallmark of information operations. Experienced digital influencers are able to exploit this grey area. Nation states with fragile democracies are especially vulnerable to such tactics.

Researchers tried on numerous occasions to conduct in-person interviews with Influencer 1, but despite briefly engaging with our requests, the interviews did not happen. However, an associate close to him, who is also part of Ruto’s inner circle, did agree to be interviewed on condition of anonymity.

This source revealed that during the August 2022 elections, Influencer 1 was part of a team of six operatives who had worked together for 13 years in the presidential press service during the Kenyatta administration. After a power struggle in that office, this individual allied himself with then vice president Ruto’s office and assumed a leading role during his presidential campaign, often embedding media images and video in his messages.

Influencer 1 positions himself as being motivated by politics. The switching of his allegiances between Kenyatta and Ruto reflects a broader trend in Kenyan politics where political parties are loose formations created to secure power. Although commercial drivers appear to influence large numbers of Kenyan online
Linked to this narrative is Influencer 1’s creation – the Hustler Nation Intelligence Bureau (HNIB). This is an online community of self-proclaimed whistleblowers who seek to hold power to account. Yet even when power has been transferred to Ruto’s Kenya Kwanza coalition, the HNIB continues to operate in parallel to state institutions, by highlighting alleged transgressions perpetrated by the (now) opposition.

An example of this is the narrative that circulated earlier this year relating to alleged income tax evasion by Odinga and his ally, former president Kenyatta. Being corrupt, captured and lacking in accountability, Influencer 1 also engaged in amplifying conspiracy theories, accusing Azimio la Umoja supporters of planning organised violent protests amounting to a virtual coup as depicted in the social media thread shown in Chart 11.

Narratives suggesting a threat to national security could serve as a pretext for autocratic governance

Taken to extremes, this kind of action by HNIB has the potential to ignite real-world action and therefore can be characterised as a form of digital vigilantism. Furthermore, amplifying narratives that suggest a threat to national security could serve as a pretext at some future date for a more autocratic style of government including a contraction of democratic space. These are described as ‘false flags’ and have gained prominence during the Russia-Ukraine war.
The source close to Influencer 1 downplayed the vigilant aspect of the HNIB narratives, although he conceded that real-world action could be an unintended consequence of such amplified narratives on social media. Furthermore, he framed the HNIB community as merely a ‘tactic’ designed to fill the gap caused by Ruto’s Kenya Kwanza coalition being ‘denied access to media advertising’ during the elections ‘because the media are predominantly owned by the other side.’ Therefore, the HNIB community ‘was a device to give a voice to an alternative opinion.’ Yet it continues to be used outside the context of a presidential election. Online vigilantism reflects a real-world form of vigilantism which has been historically present in Kenyan politics.  

Influencer 1 is also characterised by his antagonistic approach to traditional or legacy media. He often paints legacy media in his tweets as irrelevant and biased. His associate told researchers that the anti-legacy media narrative should not be considered as an attack on the editorial standards of legacy media but ‘given the business structure [of legacy media] it was a tactic.’ However, such narratives have the potential to degrade the importance of legacy media’s role as the ‘fourth estate’ in holding the powerful to account.

In his interview for this study, Nation Media Group managing editor and veteran journalist Linus Kaikai said his newsroom exercised editorial judgement independent of its ownership. While acknowledging the competition posed by social media, he said the onus was now on Kenyan legacy media to ‘increase their presence on social media platforms, promote accurate fact-based reporting’ and ‘generate content that is different to what the bloggers are peddling.’ However, resource constraints have limited legacy media’s presence on social media platforms and their ability to compete.

Influencer 1’s narratives relate almost entirely to domestic content. While he did briefly stray into an exchange claiming that the US-based organisation Vanguard Africa was operating as a political strategist for Odinga (as discussed above), he is largely dismissive of foreign influence in Kenyan affairs.

This is also underscored in his response to revelations in the international press that Team Jorge, an Israeli-based operation engaged in influence operations, had...
successfully hacked into his Telegram account. A close associate of Influencer 1 who is part of Ruto’s inner circle told researchers for this study that attempts had been made to intrude into the influencer’s account. However, they were unsuccessful because ‘we had our own countermeasures and fake accounts.’

Although Team Jorge may have exaggerated its capabilities to undercover investigative journalists, the response does suggest ‘a battle of the bots’ – i.e. the most influential actor is the one who succeeds in gaming the system. This may be a harbinger of future elections in which external actors seek to wield influence using subterfuge or AI-enhanced technologies.

Case study – Influencer 2

*Banned by Twitter at least six times*

Influencer 2 is an example of a product influencer who leveraged his network for use by the Azimio la Umoja campaign during the August 2022 presidential election. He agreed to speak with ISS researchers on condition of anonymity to assist in understanding the ecosystem in which he operates.

Influencer 2 is a highly educated Kenyan citizen with expertise in the digital marketing space. He recruits his lieutenants from prominent Kenyan universities and claims to have led a team of more than 100 operatives during the August 2022 election. ‘Campuses are very fertile recruiting grounds; graduates are easy to train and very sharp.’ News reports during the course of the election reflect this trend of hiring students as foot soldiers in political influence campaigns.

Like many involved in information operations, Influencer 2 used a number of aliases over the election which made consistent tracking of him via this study’s data analytics tools challenging. Influencer 2 was also reluctant to share any specifics about this campaign – including hashtags, accounts or narratives that were used – despite repeated requests, even under condition of anonymity.

Influencer 2’s personal social media profile was identified, but wasn’t used to any degree to manipulate or propagate any narratives during the period under review.

@MugamboWaAfrica

A source with knowledge of Influencer 2’s earlier digital marketing operations identified a Twitter account – @MugamboWaAfrica – that was allegedly operated by Influencer 2 during earlier campaigns. Upon further examination, the account no longer exists.

This type of response is indicative of a Twitter account that has been deactivated (right in the image below) by the user, or renamed. A different response would have appeared if the account had been suspended (left in the image below) by Twitter.

An archived copy of the account’s homepage was available on Wayback Machine as it appeared on 8 July 2019. From this snapshot, it was possible to obtain additional information regarding the account, including its creation date, the user-provided location of the account, the account’s biography entry and a profile image that showed the individual in charge of this operation. Importantly, it also reflected the user ID of the account.

The Twitter user ID is an important clue, since even though users can change their username, display name, profile images and bio-entries, the unique internal user ID cannot be changed by the user. For this reason, the user ID is used by Twitter to keep track of conversations between accounts even in the event that they change their usernames, and as such is a static feature of every Twitter account.
This becomes evident when a Twitter search\textsuperscript{38} for @mugambowaafrica instead returns results for @StarTimesKenya, a digital TV operator in Nairobi. This would appear to be an impersonation account.

A comparison of the user IDs for the archived version of the @MugamboWaAfrica account was compared to the present-day user ID associated with the @StarTimesKenya account. The two user IDs were identical, indicative that these are in fact the same account in different periods of time. Another corroboration is that in addition, the account creation dates for both accounts are identical if one accounts for time zone differences, and archived content posted by @MugamboWaAfrica was identical to what can be found on the present-day @StarTimesKenya account.

This type of behaviour suggests that the @MugamboWaAfrica account was repurposed into the @StarTimesKenya account, probably as part of a transactional arrangement.

The @StarTimesKenya account would retain the nearly 50 000 Kenya-based followers that @MugamboWaAfrica had attracted at that stage, bootstrapping its audience.

Influencer 2 told researchers that he had been banned by Twitter ‘at least six times’ over the course of his digital career and many of his sock puppet accounts are now dormant or have been removed from the platform. He is an example of someone able to adapt swiftly to the prevailing political and regulatory environment by generating new digital identities that build on existing networks.

As shown in Part I of this study, the product influencer community played a highly significant role in the Kenyan election, demonstrating an increasing trend of ‘influence as a service’. This influencer also shares a characteristic with many in this community, leveraging his influence for political actors during the election season, only to return to product influencing in the following months. In the case of Influencer 2 the motivation was largely driven by ‘security concerns’ and fears for his own personal safety.

Significantly, this individual told researchers that he had been involved in influence campaigns during three different elections ‘in Africa and beyond,’ although he would not disclose the location. Like many influencers in Kenya, he describes influence as being ‘driven by commerce not ideology’ and told researchers that he would be prepared to work for whoever ‘pays,’ including national states. He claimed he had been approached by foreign actors several times to leverage his networks, but confirmed he was only working for a Kenyan client(s) during the August 2022 election.
The US, China, Russia and Israel are among the nation states seeking to hire influence operatives during elections in Africa, but this influencer would not disclose which foreign actors had sought (and failed) to recruit him for the Kenya election. However, the overwhelming evidence from this research is that influence operations during the August 2022 election were largely home-grown. Techniques may have been imported from other nation states, but operations were crafted and driven by Kenyan actors.

Influencer 2 played largely a reactive role responding to the deep state narrative that became the hallmark of Ruto’s Kenya Kwanza coalition’s campaign. Depending on the circumstances and timing, the influencer would charge between 10 000 Ksh to millions of Kenyan shillings for one hashtag. He confirmed that the social engineering component of influence campaigns was ‘highly critical.’

He revealed that when generating narratives or hashtags, he would select emotional topics related to religion, poverty and the idea of the underdog in order to secure amplification and reach. Although much of the work of his influence team was done manually, future AI tools ‘will greatly assist influence operations,’ he said. Yet he predicts that the ‘human touch’ or social engineering component would continue to play a prominent role.

Case study – Influencer 3

‘These public insults and attacks on institutions will hurt you’

Influencer 3 is a Kenyan blogger, political activist, and social media personality. He is known for his outspoken views and his use of social media to promote political and social issues in Kenya. He has been a prominent voice in the Kenyan blogosphere and has written on a variety of topics, including politics, corruption, and social justice. This individual has also been involved in activism, particularly around issues related to freedom of expression and access to information.

His Twitter account was assessed during the elections. While there was no indication that he used inauthentic amplification or bots to propagate any narratives, his own influence – cultivated over years in the activism and commentary space – provides sufficient gravitas to steer conversations. With more than two million followers, this influencer’s tweets are frequently retweeted in significant volumes.

During the election period, Influencer 3 engaged in various topics of discussion. His most popular tweets related to digital activism, including questioning low wages paid to Safaricom employees\(^\text{39}\) and the killing of Pakistani investigative reporter Arshad Sharif in Nairobi.\(^\text{40}\)

Product influencers played a major role in the poll, showing an increasing trend of ‘influence as a service’

Influencer 3 also aligned himself to the fair and democratic processes and importance of the rule of law.\(^\text{41}\) In addition to supporting Ruto’s campaign, this influencer periodically supported Odinga\(^\text{42}\) and criticised Ruto.\(^\text{43}\) Furthermore, he was deeply critical of the conduct of IEBC chairperson Wafula Chebukati\(^\text{44}\) and his fellow commissioners, and sought to position himself as a custodian of Kenya’s democratic norms.

Conclusion

The Kenyan elections of August 2022 demonstrated an active and growing private marketplace for online influence. While some external activity was flagged, including that by online users located in neighbouring states, the overwhelming activity observed was home-grown. This is in sharp contrast to previous elections where foreign influence operations including those of companies such as Cambridge Analytica played a significant role in Kenyan election discourse.

What we observe in Kenya is the ‘franchising’ and rebranding of that model as a Kenyan service. We are also seeing the devolution of that model from the big political players to every political player having a team of people who target the opposition and create social media myths and disinformation campaigns.\(^\text{45}\)

In many ways Kenya has become a testing ground for the weaponisation of social media, and in future – given
its levels of digital penetration – may enjoy a comparative advantage over its neighbours in this regard.

Kenyan influencers used tactics to amplify narratives and engagement observed in other settings – most notably the US and Russia. For instance, the use of follow trains, sock puppet accounts and astroturfing was prevalent. Indeed, Kenya has established its own influence industry.

Significant voter education was undertaken before the August 2022 election by a number of NGOs. This resulted in many fake news stories aimed at distorting reality through text-, image- or video-based messaging being flagged as ‘fake’ by fact-checking organisations.

The existence of false information is however only one part of the equation. A secondary consideration focuses on behaviour, i.e. how narratives are spread, and how networks aimed at ‘gaming the system’ could be leveraged to promote truthful and false narratives that are aligned with their political favourites. A trend towards ‘gaming the system’ is consistent with the evolution of influence operations on social media platforms.46

The study also highlights the ‘commodification’ of influence, whereby influence acquires a monetary value. Prices for creating hashtags and influencers for hire are becoming a common feature of the Kenyan digital information landscape. Furthermore, the primary motivation for influence operators in Kenya is commercial. Although ideology may appear to drive some narratives, given the unstable nature of Kenyan political party formations the phenomenon of ‘influence as a service’ is becoming entrenched in Kenya.

Influence entrepreneurship opens the door for criminal networks, terrorists or state actors to use influencers to shape domestic narratives online

Such influence entrepreneurship opens the door for other actors such as transnational criminal networks, terrorist organisations or nation state actors to use influence merchants to shape domestic narratives and amplify them online. In vulnerable information environments, including those where democratic institutions are weak, the potential to use influence to affect real-world outcomes (e.g. by tapping into pre-existing fears or prejudices such as ethnicity, religion, etc.) is increased.

The rapid growth of AI to create seemingly human-like avatars and virtual and natural processing language tools such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT are likely to be adopted by influence merchants. Those interviewed for this study indicated a willingness to use such technologies. The result is likely to be a ramping up of the speed and spread of influence operations online and the possibility of a global arms race in AI-enhanced influence campaigning. This will pose a challenge for rebutting and refuting narratives by human beings.
Recommendations

With what has been characterised by many as the collapse of the legacy media business model in Kenya, media houses in future will have to position themselves as ‘centres of truth’ where people can find credible information. This will require a presence both online and offline in order to maximise reach both to Kenya’s digitally connected and digitally deprived communities.

Media houses also need to be made aware of the unintended consequences of inadvertently amplifying content online. Editors need to instil a culture of professionalism among media professionals, such that moonlighting between blogging, selling influence and serving as a professional journalist with an accredited media organisation is discouraged. While accepting that journalists may seek other employment opportunities given that salaries are low, the role of journalism in democratic societies must be underscored and valued.

While one influencer said ‘elections are about tactics and how truths are narrated,’ elections are an important marker of democratic engagement. Greater automation in influence operations threatens to further erode the link between the elected and the electorate and undermine accountability. Therefore, those engaged in public communications on behalf of Kenya’s democratic institutions need to be responsive to online narratives. They must be prepared to deploy counter-narratives in a timely fashion in order to counteract disinformation and ‘set the record straight,’ and develop strong professional ties with legacy media.

While there are concerns in international policy circles about influence operations conducted by external actors in Kenya and the geostrategic implications, Kenya has demonstrated its ability to generate its own indigenous influence campaigns. This is an important reminder of African agency and also Kenya’s position as a rapidly emerging digital state.

While it may represent a site of digital competition between other digital superpowers (for instance in terms of technology acquisition, procurement and infrastructure, etc.), the possibility of Kenya outsourcing its own influence expertise to other actors, as well as being a recipient of influence tactics from external actors, cannot be discounted.

Given the active social media presence in Kenya and expertise within the technology sector, this talent should be harnessed to assist in countering toxic narratives online. Such a policy could also serve to divert potential influencers away from selling their influence to manipulate and distort during elections and rather channel it into supporting the democratic process.

There are a number of other significant elections in Africa on the horizon. International policymakers need to be alive to the tactics observed in Kenya’s August 2022 elections being replicated elsewhere. South Africa, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are among the states expected to experience highly contested elections over the coming year. Kenya may serve as an inspiration to influence merchants seeking to dominate election narratives, amplify disinformation and undermine democratic institutions.

Researchers should consider monitoring the range of tools, including sophisticated ‘deep fakes’ and other AI tools, that influence merchants’ use in future elections in Kenya and across Africa. This information should form the basis of a public information campaign to build resilience among citizens.

Acknowledgements

The data analytics and computational analytics for this study were carried out by Kyle Findlay and Aldu Cornelissen, who now operate under the brand Murmur Intelligence.

We also wish to thank Allan Cheboi at Code for Africa, Alphonce Shiundu of Africa Check and John-Allan Namu of the non-governmental organisation Africa Uncensored, along with others who agreed to participate in face-to-face or online interviews with ISS researchers.
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The ISS is grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

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