Facebook live-streaming, drones and swag selfies: youth culture and visual social media in #ZambiaDecides

Digital technology is transforming the way in which elections are held globally, including on the African continent. With young voters comprising a substantial part of the electorate, political campaigning is increasingly shifting online. As LSE's Wendy Willems argues in the second article of a series about the role of digital technology and social media in Zambia's recent elections, political parties tapped into digital youth culture in a number of interesting ways.

In Zambia's recent elections held on August 11, the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) enabled registered voters to verify their registration status by SMS. The Commission also engaged citizens on Facebook and Twitter, assisted them with queries, live-streamed press conferences on social media and uploaded election results on its website. However, voters were not allowed to use mobile phones inside the polling station on election day; the Commission argued that mobile phone use could 'inconvenience the voter' and potentially 'compromise the secrecy of the ballot'. As reported earlier, social media intensified the circulation of information on election-related incidents.

But possibly even more transformative was the way in which political parties enthusiastically incorporated a range of digital technologies in their campaigns. In the run-up to the ballot, the two main political parties, Patriotic Front (PF) and United Party for National Development (UPND), produced a number of slick, short campaign videos which included drone camera shots of crowds which served to visually prove the party's supporter base. These were not only broadcast on television but also posted on the parties' YouTube channels and shared via Facebook and Twitter.

The Facebook pages of the two key presidential candidates were updated several times a day and brought together large numbers of voters: nearly 400,000 likes for the ruling PF's Edgar Lungu and almost 350,000 for the opposition UPND's Hakainde Hichilema. This enabled political parties to campaign online; to communicate with the electorate, media institutions and the wider public; and to receive direct feedback through posts and comments from voters. Sponsored adverts were used to attract higher numbers of 'likes' while other adverts on online news websites encouraged prospective voters to submit reasons why not to vote for the opposition candidate.

However, digital technology did not only transform political campaigning but the way in which campaigns are normally carried out in Zambia also shaped the particular use of digital technology. Political songs and rallies remain crucial means through which Zambian political parties convey their messages to the electorate, and these are increasingly being 'digitised'.

This year's elections saw a battle between PF's song 'Dununa Reverse' and UPND's 'Dununa Forward'. Songs circulated in the urban landscape through the blasting stereos of commuter omnibuses and loudspeakers in bustling markets but were also shared digitally between mobile phone users as MP3 files via WhatsApp or Bluetooth. Arguably, the frequent involvement of musicians in election campaigns could be said to be partially

provoked by the digital turn. High levels of piracy make it very challenging for musicians gain any significant revenue out of CD sales which leaves performances at political rallies as a tempting and necessary source of income.

While political rallies are usually broadcast on radio and television, PF and UPND also live-streamed this year's rallies on their presidential candidates' individual Facebook pages. This enabled voters to watch rallies at their workplace, on the go or at home in the evenings (those able to afford data-costly, mobile video streaming). It provided political parties instant feedback from voters. Livestreaming has also proven important in the aftermath of the elections as it has allowed the opposition UPND (which is contesting the election results pointing to a number of voting irregularities) to broadcast its press conferences. This is crucial given the closure of the popular, privately owned television station MUVI TV on 23 August 2016.

Apart from direct broadcasts, political parties also shared — wide-angled — photo albums of rallies on Facebook and Twitter in order to persuade prospective voters of the large crowds that their rallies attracted. But it is also citizens themselves who produced and shared photos and video footage during this year's elections. Video footage with 'evidence' of a number of incidents of political violence has been shared on Facebook and WhatsApp, provoking further speculation and rumours on both sides of the political divide. Other aspects of the elections offered more cheerful photo opportunities for Zambians to document on their smartphones such as the spectacular helicopter landing of presidential candidates during political rallies, or the 'finger selfie' of a proudly inked thumb – evidence that one has cast one's vote. For one young Zambian voter, spotting a friend's finger selfie on his Facebook timeline proved crucial in his decision to join the voting queue as he felt he should not be left out.

Zambian mobile phone users taking photos of helicopter landing of UPND's presidential candidate, Hakainde Hichilema at a rally in Mandevu, Lusaka Photo Credit: Wendy Willems

Smartphones also enabled voters to show off their party regalia and share photos on their Facebook timeline. This was important because as other analyses have shown, this year's election campaign offered a skewed playing field where the opposition UPND did not have the same level of resources and opportunities to campaign as compared to the ruling party. PF's visual dominance in Lusaka's urban landscape was extraordinary with numerous billboards, posters and countless supporters dressed in party regalia. It was considerably less safe for UPND supporters to walk around in regalia in certain parts of Lusaka but some supporters felt safe enough to post selfies in UPND gear on Facebook.

PF supporters posing for a selfie during a political rally in Woodlands stadium, Lusaka Photo Credit: Wendy Willems

However, party regalia selfies were also popular because this year's outfits were particularly 'swag', tapping into the latest youth fashion trends. While in previous elections, party regalia give-aways mainly comprised of printed t-shirts and *chitenges* (wrap-around skirts), this year's contest saw a wide variety of cool sweatshirts, hats, caps, overalls and – controversially – skimpy leggings. Coupled with catchy party songs performed by some of Zambia's most popular musicians, including JK and Organised Family, this almost turned political rallies into fashion shows and as a result, these became popular photo opportunities to show off one's swag.

Ultimately, this subtly transformed individual voters into — online and offline — party campaigners. Hence, while the digital remediation of the visual spectacle of Zambia's political campaigns did not radically transform these, it gave the campaigns a fresh youthful twist.

Read the first and third article in this series.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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