

# Digital Activism in Uganda

Monica B. Chibita\*

2016

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\*Monica B. Chibita; Uganda Christian University, Mukono, Uganda e-mail: mbchibita@gmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

Since the current NRM government came into power in 1986, there has been significant growth in the availability of public channels of communication, and in legislation to guarantee freedom of expression and access to information. The country has also opened up to multi-party democracy after nearly four decades of military rule or a one-party state. Both mobile phone and internet use have grown and citizens have used these avenues to network, to express themselves, to mobilize and to advocate for causes. Over the years, there has been growing opposition to the manner in which the country is governed in particular aspects such as the conduct of elections, poor management of natural resources, lack of fiscal discipline and poor service delivery which has been expressed through the media, and most recently the new media. There is also growing evidence of government discomfort with citizens' use of the new media platforms to express discontent.

This chapter discusses the growing tension between the Ugandan government and its citizens as the latter's activism migrates from the mainstream to the new media platforms to advance various causes in the face of shrinking space for self-expression in the mainstream media. The methodology of the chapter includes document analysis, in-depth interviews with key activists, and qualitative analysis of online content. The goal of the chapter is to document and tease out patterns that throw light on the trajectory of digital activism in Uganda.

## ACTIVISM AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM

According to Permanent Culture Now, activism refers to 'taking action to effect social change'. Such change may be in the social, political, economic or environmental domain. Activism is normally associated with social movements. The most common types of activism include grassroots activism, letter writing and petitions, direct lobbying, litigation, demonstrations, civil disobedience, digital activism and others. Often activism progresses along a continuum with letters and petitions being on one side and aggressive activities like protests, disobedience and 'hacktivism' being on the other (see Watson 2005). Hacktivism refers to the subversive use of computers or computer networks to achieve the goals of activism and is often linked to cyber-terrorism. Any or a combination of these tactics may be used to demand a solution to a problem by taking an oppositional stance; creating alternatives to the dominant system through effecting some form of behaviour change (e.g. walking to work to protest pollution) or taking revolutionary action aimed at 'toppling' major institutions of society. For purposes of this discussion, activism may be categorized as online, or offline.

Vegh (2003) defines online activism (also known as or related to digital activism, cyber-activism or e-activism) as 'a politically motivated movement relying on the internet'. Online activism, according to Vegh, is proactive, aims at achieving certain goals, and is usually targeted at 'the controls and authorities imposing them' (2003, p. 72).

Joyce (2010, p. viii) defines online or digital activism as 'the use of digital technologies: mobile phones and internet-enabled devices, for example-in campaigns for social and political change'. Digital activism strategies may either be internet-based, or simply internet-enhanced. Vegh says in internet-based strategies the internet is used for activities that are only possible online, like virtual sit-ins, or hacking. Internet-assisted strategies, on the other hand, only use the internet to enhance the traditional media's role in the campaign. This may include extending the boundaries of awareness, or increasing efficiency (Vegh 2003, p. 71).

Vegh further categorizes online activism into three. The first type, awareness/advocacy activism is where individuals or independent organizations seek to highlight information or news that the mainstream media, either by commission or omission have misreported, under-reported or ignored. The second type, organization/mobilization refers to activism which uses the internet to call for offline action such as a march, call for transfer of a typically offline action online (for instance sending your local Member of Parliament an email instead of a letter by post or instead of meeting him/her in person). This category of activism can also call for an action that is only possible online such as 'spamming' a targeted person or organization's website. The third category which Vegh calls action/reaction mostly relates to deliberate destructive online action such as hacking to draw attention to a cause or to cripple the targeted person or organization (2003, pp. 73–75).

Digital activism as we know it has been largely enabled by the new media, and more specifically the phenomenon of social media. The new media in question here are the internet, and mobile telephone technology that makes the internet accessible on the move. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define social media as 'a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content'. Examples of the most popular social media sites include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google Plus+, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, Flickr and WhatsApp.

For a long time, the research focus in Africa was on the traditional media (particularly radio and TV) and their democratic and developmental potential. However, what we refer to today as the social media experience is made possible by new means of communication, particularly the internet and mobile phones. In the last two decades, the research emphasis has shifted towards the various new media because of their immense popularity, particularly among the 'millennials'. The potential of new media technologies in Africa has been hailed by many scholars and development partners. Socha and Eber-Schmid (2012), for instance, argue that new media 'holds out a possibility of on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content'. They talk about the new media's 'democratization' of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content' and the death of the gate-keeper. Scholars such as Diamond (2010)

have, as a result, named these media 'liberation' media. The internet falls under this category, as do certain types of mobile phones that meet the above criteria.

In Africa, the new media have been credited for the improvement of information gathering, processing, distribution, storage, and engagement between political leaders and their populations. They have been praised for empowering ordinary people and enabling them to mobilize and to participate in public discourse on subjects pertaining to 'democracy' and 'development' (see, for instance, Underwood 2005; Banda et al. 2009; Diamond 2010). The most basic forms of new media uses have given ordinary people access to power-centres that they had never had before, and expanded the parameters for ordinary people to participate in important discourses. Hadji (2016, p. 74) contends that through the use of social media policy analysis, evaluation, and monitoring can be promoted and political no-go areas can be penetrated. He says,

the use of social media provides for better and faster means to, firstly, get help and support through publicity of events, to, secondly access related help from various sources including networks, and, finally to frame issues in a fluid manner that allows for focus and shifting of concerns with the reality on the ground without having to wait for the 24-hour news-cycle....They provide an alternative space for reviving a dormant public consciousness into sentient, dynamic, social discourse (Hadji 2016, p. 75, 77).

CIMA (2008, p. 10) puts the possible import of these technological developments for democracy this way: 'The overarching theme...is the rise of a pluralized, diverse and multi-mediated public sphere, with individuals, groups, corporations, governments, and other entities freely co-mingling to influence public opinion.'

However, other scholars have questioned the magic that these technologies are able to work in African contexts. Castells and Ince (2003), for instance, caution against excessive enthusiasm. Other scholars including Alzouma (2005), Tumusiime (2007) and Duncan (2013) all caution against getting carried away with the 'magic' of the new technologies without due consideration of the social, economic and political contexts within which these technologies are appropriated.

A significant proportion of findings from empirical studies of the use of the new media technologies in African contexts cite challenges related to lack of access, costs of connectivity, availability of network coverage and lack of skills to optimize the use of the new media technologies. While economies of scale have brought down internet prices in many developed countries, purchasing power, illiteracy and language barriers in African countries keep the numbers low and the prices high. Furthermore, while the number of users on the continent among a certain social class is rising steadily (Global Internet Report 2015), the sheer price of a mobile phone, or a computer, or the cost of connectivity, put these devices beyond the reach of the majority of citizens. Thus Brodock (2010, p. 21) argues, 'while digital activism promises to increase the effectiveness of grassroots efforts around the world, the digital divide hinders this process by limiting participation'. Other obstacles include illiteracy and language. Government surveillance is also cited as a major obstacle. There is reason to suspect that as governments have sought to

engage people through the social media, they have used this as an excuse for monitoring social media activity with the ultimate aim of censorship.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2009) puts it even more appropriately, even if the report refers to an American context:

whether they take place on the Internet or off, traditional political activities remain the domain of those with high levels of income and education.... Contrary to the hopes of some advocates, the Internet is not changing the socio-economic character of civic engagement in the United States. Just as in offline civic life, the well-to-do and well-educated are more likely than those less well-off to participate in online political activities.

In situations where there is intolerance to diverse political views, there is evidence to indicate that restrictive media policies also constitute a major obstacle to digital activism. Ironically though, the same policies play a part in driving activism to the internet and mobile phones where individuals and organizations with various causes perceive more opportunities for free expression. Ushahidi, a Kenyan civil society initiative that pioneered the adoption and use of Google Maps to map out violence 'hotspots' during the period following the contentious Kenyan 2007 elections provides a fresh example of this (see Goldstein and Rotich 2008; Cullum 2010, p. 57). Khamis et al. (2012) document the digital strategies used in the Egyptian and Syrian political uprisings of 2011. Baguma and Eilu (2015) list ways in which the mobile phone can be combined with social media to accomplish things which may not otherwise be possible in less than free political environments such as typify many African countries.

Given that the political space in African contexts tends to be more highly contested than other spaces, Baguma and Eilu (2015, p. 15) indicate that a combination of mobile telephones and social media have demonstrated the potential to accomplish the following during elections: send politically themed ringtones for callers to hear or download onto their phones; recruit supporters for rallies and other campaign events using short code; raise money from supporters by charging instant donations to their phone bill or mobile money for countries where it exists and encourage supporters to forward text messages, ring tones, links and short codes to friends and family. According to Cullum (2010, pp. 50–52), mobile phones have also been used to facilitate movement before and during rallies, encourage people to take action, sign petitions, or simply demonstrate support. Cullum highlights the element of speed that gives an edge to mobile phone communication in digital activism:

Using mobile technology, a joke, rumour, political message or link can spread contagiously like an epidemic. When a person forwards a text message with the instructions or information to those in his phone's address book, it is received by individuals who personally know and trust the sender. If the receiver believes the

message to be true and important, he or she will then likely forward the message to others. As such messages go viral and it becomes harder for authorities to stop them.

Thus the literature reveals that the new media have tremendous potential for digital activism but the obstacles relating to the infrastructure, access, skills and security are real and may impinge on the optimization of these technologies for activism.

### PROSPECTS FOR DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN UGANDA

According to World Internet Statistics, by 30 November 2015, 1.8 million of 34.8 million Ugandans had access to the internet. According to the State of Internet Freedom in Uganda: Survey on access, privacy and security online (CIPESA 2015), most Ugandans used email, WhatsApp, Mobile SMS, Facebook and Mobile Chats. In an attempt to make the internet more accessible to rural Ugandans, the government put in place the Uganda Rural Development Fund. This has enabled the establishment of hundreds of internet points of presence (POPs), equipping of rural school laboratories and training in ICT skills. Such efforts notwithstanding, the high cost of access and infrastructural bottlenecks still lock out many Ugandans, especially in the rural areas. There are also challenges of basic literacy as well as technological literacy (Baguma and Eilu 2015, p. 9). The above notwithstanding, statistics from World Internet Statistics (2015) indicate that in the last decade, mobile-phone usage in Uganda has expanded rapidly, and with it the use of social media, especially among people below 35.

However, perhaps the most salient challenge to the freedoms associated with the advent of the new media is government intervention to curtail freedom of expression offline and online. Although the social media are gaining popularity as a means of disseminating news and information, in Uganda, therefore, CIPESA (2015) reports that there have been many attempts by the Ugandan government to curtail its citizens' ability to optimize the social media for mobilization and social action. This has been particularly pronounced around election periods but has also featured whenever government has suspected that either civil society or sections of the public are getting too critical of the actions of government using the available media platforms. There have, therefore, been attempts by government to curtail freedom of expression online in other instances as well, such as in the case of the Save Mabira environmental protest of 2007/2011, the walk-to-work protest of 2011 or the 2016 elections. It is worth noting that in curtailing online activity, the Ugandan government has largely invoked existing laws. The next section provides an overview of some of these laws.

### MIXED MESSAGES ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY

The current National Resistance Movement (NRM) government took over power from the previous government by force of arms in 1986. In 1995, a progressive constitution (Uganda 1995) came into force. Article 29 (a) of that constitution states:

Every person shall have the right to:

- (a) Freedom of speech and expression, which shall include freedom of the press and other media;
- (b) Freedom of thought, conscience and belief which shall include academic freedom in institutions of learning.

Article 41 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda guarantees the right of access to information, even though it places the emphasis on access to information in the possession of the state.

The laws of Uganda provide for privacy in article 27 which states in part that 'No person shall be subjected to interference with the privacy of his home, correspondence, communications or other property.'

The above three provisions are related to the extent that the right to privacy helps guarantee the enjoyment of freedom of expression, and access to information makes freedom of expression in the broadest sense of the term, a reality.

The freedoms promised by Article 27, 29 (a) and 41 of Uganda's constitution must, however, be read in the context of Article 43 which sets the boundaries within which media freedom and the right to access to information should be enjoyed. Article 43 states: 'In the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitution, no person shall prejudice the fundamental or other human right and freedoms of others or the public interest'. While the media, civil society and the public tend to cite Article 29 and 41 often when they perceive a threat to their rights and freedoms, the state has tended to lean towards article 43 and invoked the 'public interest' in curtailing people's freedom to access information and express themselves in 'other media'. This in spite of the caution embedded in section c of Article 43 (c) which states 'Any limitation of the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms (prescribed by this Chapter) must not be beyond what is acceptable and demonstrably justifiable in a free and democratic society, or what is provided for in the Constitution. As Joyce observes,

...repressive and authoritarian governments do not limit themselves to legal channels when shaping the digital activism environment. In these countries, even activists who have access to digital technologies have difficulties using them because of government-imposed limitations. These governments track online political speech and block applications used by digital activists. Often such online obstruction leads to offline persecution and even imprisonment (Joyce 2010, p. 6).



## CIRCUMSCRIBING ACTIVISM

Uganda held its first local government elections under the new government in 2011. However, these were held under the 'umbrella' of the ruling NRM, as political parties at the time were banned. The ban was lifted in 2005 and the country held its first multi-party elections in 2006.

In the lead-up to the 2006 elections, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), the converged regulator for the broadcast and telecommunications industry, ordered the shut-down of [www.radiokatwe.com](http://www.radiokatwe.com), a site which had waged a campaign against the incumbent President Museveni, the first family and some government officials who they variously accused of corruption, nepotism and inefficiency. The UCC's defence was that Ugandan law 'empowers the commission to direct any telecoms operator to operate networks in such a manner that is appropriate to national and public interest' (Committee to Protect Journalists 2006). A spokesman for the ruling NRM told the New Vision newspaper that the site was publishing 'malicious and false information against the party and its presidential candidate'. The site, according to Open Net Africa, had received 71,000 hits in one day. Although Ugandans managed to by-pass the ban using proxy servers, the shut-down sent a message that no platform was beyond surveillance or regulation.

On 30 May 2015, the president of Uganda threatened with immediate arrest people who were circulating video-recordings on social media pitting two ethnic groups (the Bahima and the Bakiga) against one another. Section 41 of Uganda's Penal Code Act defines promoting sectarianism as the act of printing, publishing, making or uttering any statement likely to '(a) degrade, revile or expose to hatred or contempt; (b) create alienation or despondency of; (c) raise discontent or disaffection among; or (d) promote, in any other way, feelings of ill-will or hostility among or against, any group or body of persons' on the grounds of religion, tribe, ethnic or regional origin. It is important to note that the president belongs to the Bahima ethnic group and his ex-prime minister who was also running for president the same year comes from the Bakiga ethnic group.

Section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act (Uganda 2011) states, 'Any person who willfully and repeatedly uses electronic communication to disturb or attempt to disturb the peace, quiet or right of privacy of any person with no purpose of legitimate communication whether or not a conversation ensues commits a misdemeanour.' In 2015, in the lead up to the 2016 elections, Police ransacked the home of Robert Shaka. They confiscated electronic equipment and then arrested and charged him with intruding on the privacy of the president. Shaka, a media critic, had been mistaken for a notorious social media activist known as TVO (for Tom Voltaire Okwalinga) who had repeatedly posted negative messages about, among other things, the health status of President Museveni. Shaka was released on bail a week after his arrest. This was a signal to people who use the internet to be careful what they post because the 'long arm of the law' would occasionally catch up with them.

It is worth noting that recently, when the government of Uganda has shut down mainstream media houses, it has also shut down or disrupted their websites. For instance, in 2006, the

government blocked access to 93.3 KFM, a privately-owned radio station, and the website of its sister newspaper the Daily Monitor for publishing election results without the authority of the Electoral Commission. The blockage was only removed after the official results from the Electoral Commission had been declared. Subsequently, the FDC, the leading opposition party, complained that the blockage had stopped their agents from transmitting results and cast doubts on the authenticity of the results declared by the electoral commission.

The Ugandan government has also sought to maintain a degree of surveillance over the social media by setting up monitoring bodies. In 2013, a national Computer Emergency Response Team (Ug-CERT) was set up to 'provide[s] information and assistance to its constituents in implementing pro-active measures to reduce the risks of computer security incidents as well as responding to such incidents when they occur [sic]'. (Uganda Computer Emergency Response Team-UG-Cert) The team is housed under the National Information Technology Authority (NITAU), one of several regulators for the Information Technology sector.

## DOING DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN UGANDA

This section takes a close look at three campaigns: the 'Save Mabira' protest aimed at preventing government from de-gazetting one third of the county's largest natural forest in 2007 and then in 2011; the opposition Forum for Democratic Change (FDC)'s protest aimed at forcing a change in the country's leadership and epitomized by the 'walk-to-work' protests of 2011 and the FDC's campaign to remove Museveni from the presidency in 2016.

### **The Save Mabira Campaign 2007/2011**

On 8 August 2006, The Monitor newspaper published a story stating that President Museveni had instructed the minister in charge of the environment to give away 7,100 Hectares of land to Mahendra Mehta, a Ugandan investor of Indian extraction, to enable him to plant more sugar-cane. It emerged in this and other reports that followed, that the deal involving approximately one-third of Uganda's largest tropical rain forest had been cut in secret between Museveni and Mehta in the period leading up to the February 2006 elections. The Mehta group which Mahendar Mehta heads owns several companies in Uganda including the Sugar Corporation of Uganda (SCOUL). Because the Ugandan government had de-gazetted other forest land including a section of Bugala forest to make way for another foreign investor to plant oil palm despite widespread protests, civil society reacted immediately. Under the leadership of the National Association for Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) and with the support of international NGOS, they formed a coalition and mobilized thousands of Ugandans to protest against the proposed give-away. The protest was originally led by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOS) including National Association of Professional Environmentalists, Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE), Greenwatch, Environmental Action Network, Environmental Alert, Anti-Corruption



Coalition of Uganda, Nature Uganda and National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) which played the coordinating role. Other participants included international environmental NGOs, politicians from government and the opposition, religious institutions including a range of churches under the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC), the Muslim community, and cultural institutions including Buganda and Busoga where the forest was located, affected communities, Traders led by the Kampala City Traders Association (KACITA), the Media and the International Community. This according to many accounts, was the broadest coalition in Uganda ever formed to deal with a single environmental issue.

At the local level, NAPE and ACODE were the lead agencies with regards to strategy and responding to government litigation as well as initiating strategic litigation. According to the former Executive Director of one of the leading NGOS in the coalition, the goal of the coalition was to Save Mabira Forest, but more importantly, to stop the de-gazetting of natural forests. At a deeper level, Mabira was a political issue like any other. Thus as one network system specialist and civil society activist who played a key role in the coordination of the online campaign observed, 'the politics around Mabira was centred around sugar, but it was actually about land – the irregular give-away of land' (S. Mubiru, Personal Communication, 11 May 11 2016). Mabira thus became a 'symbol' or an issue around which activists could mobilize. Unlike previous similar moves by government to de-gazette forests, Mabira was large, and centrally located, so it was easier to mobilize the whole country around it. The organizing committee claims to have mobilized up to two million Ugandans using both traditional and new media.

### **The Campaign in the Media**

The coalition sought to raise awareness about the importance of Mabira forest and highlighted the fact that given its proximity to Lake Victoria and River Nile the forest is a major catchment area. They also argued that it is a source of livelihood for many people. Furthermore, they emphasized the fact that it is a source of important medicinal plants, firewood and construction material for the local communities. They pointed out that it is a source of important and unique information for researchers, as well as a popular eco-tourism site. The forest's destruction, therefore, they argued, would contribute greatly to climate change, affect many livelihoods and species and have an adverse effect on the economy. Above all, they argued that the de-gazetting would set a precedent for government impunity (Child 2009, pp. 248–251).

Two of the coalition leaders interviewed admitted there was no planned or agreed overall communication strategy. However, another key informant who was more new-media-savvy said there was a strategy, although the members from civil society were not that involved in its formulation. The coalition, nevertheless ran an effective campaign that optimized both the traditional and the new media. As one of them said, they 'simply took advantage of every opportunity that presented itself on radio, television, the print media, the internet and mobile telephones' (G. Tumushabe, Personal Communication, 4 May 2016). Interviews with the former executive director of an environmental NGO, a leading environmental activist who played a central

role in the Save Mabira campaign and a female communication strategist for the campaign all confirm that the print media played a key role, with both the major national papers (The New Vision and the Daily Monitor) publishing several news stories, editorials and analytical pieces on the protest as it gained ground. The Independent magazine played a particularly pro-active role, strategically publishing key stories highlighting the gravity of the problem or analysing the implications of the give-away. The protestors identified several friendly journalists whom they embedded with major media organizations to ensure the Mabira story stayed on the agenda, since the majority of Ugandans accessed the mainstream media, and particularly radio, and policy-makers were key targets of the newspapers and television. A leading local environmentalist puts it this way: 'The rest of the print media regularly reported on the issue, keeping the need to stop the give-way on the public's minds. What we appreciated the most is that unlike other stories, the media stayed with this story for a long time, making it possible to influence public opinion' (F. Muramuzi, Personal communication 5 May 2016).

The coalition's engagement strategy was two-pronged: while they were in constant dialogue with government agencies like the National Environmental Authority (NEMA) and the National Forestry Authority (NFA), they at the same time liaised with sympathizers living abroad to raise the issue of the Mabira Forest give-away at key international fora whenever the opportunity arose. Besides the print media, the activists also took every opportunity to appear on interactive radio and talk shows, and to leverage on the mainstream media's online presence hence expanding their reach.

### **New Media**

All activists interviewed pointed out that in 2007, the use of Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms was only beginning to take root in Uganda so the leaders of the campaign (mostly local NGOS) did not utilize them much. Young people mostly used Facebook to discuss lifestyle not issues 'pertinent to the development of this country', according to Shawn Mubiru (Personal Communication, 11 May 2016). The focus was more on lifestyle. This notwithstanding, some individuals maintained active blogs and debated the Mabira give-away. Some academics were also active on Facebook. A search on Wordpress alone yielded 168,000 blogs that mentioned or discussed the Mabira give-away. Several Facebook groups were formed around the issue. One such group was 'Save Mabira Now.' Several young people came on board. This page attracted civil society to Facebook which hitherto they had not used much. Another page created by one David Onen on 23 August 2011 'Save Mabira: Boycott Lugazi Sugar.' To date, this group boasts of 441 members. Some of the members include prominent media personalities Ronnie Mich Egwang, a renowned television host, Harry Sagara, a famous satirical writer and James Onen (alias Fatboy), a seasoned morning show radio presenter with one of Uganda's leading English radio stations; Sanyu FM.

The key messages in the conversations pertaining to the Save Mabira protest included calls for the boycott of Lugazi Sugar, as well as of the ruling NRM government. Other members of the

group reduced the issue to race. Some members of the group used these opportunities to vent their anger against Asians in general, accusing them of stealing Ugandans' land. The Facebook conversations betrayed deep-seated emotions of anger and frustration with President Museveni, the government and foreign investors, and in particular Asians. Some group members expressed a sense of betrayal by their government which had been entrusted with an important natural resource.

A few members expressed their support of the forest giveaway. These, however, were outnumbered and drew the wrath of other Ugandans who labelled them 'traitors' and 'unpatriotic'. The momentum was in the opposite direction and such pro-give-away posts which also came from government operatives drew insults from the supporters of the Save Mabira Campaign.

The use of micro-blogs like Twitter was more limited and confined to the more highly educated elite. Using hashtags like #Mabira and #Save Mabira, discussions on Twitter attempted to link the give-away to a range of concerns that included race and labour relations, environmental degradation, possible tax-evasion, lack of transparency in share-holding in the sugar industry, and campaign financing.

Websites were used to raise awareness, call for action (both from government, for instance to find alternative sources of land for SCOUL) and from activists (for instance to join the protest march that took place in April 2007). According to the leader of one local environmental NGO who became the face of the campaign, websites helped bring the Mabira issue to the outside world. In October 2006, the Coalition launched a petition on [petitiontime.com](http://petitiontime.com). According to Child (2009, p. 247), the petition was immensely successful, registering on average 2,000 signatures a day within a month of its launch. At the peak of the campaign in April 2007, the signatures per day had more than doubled. The NGO's created links to as many partner local and international organizations' website as possible and called on all partners to do the same.

Many of the coalition partners had websites. We were able to post the objectives of the campaign and the campaign strategy. We also used the website to post updates. This created a worldwide distribution of the message – what we would call a multiplier effect (F. Muramuzi, Personal conversation, 5 May 2016).

The coalition built up large and international mailing lists which they used to post updates, and to call for action including asking people to pass the message on, and to contact the 'enemies' of Mabira and stop the give-away. According to one of the coalition's communication strategists, the activists also used email to mobilize. Email was, in addition, also used to encourage people to engage their members of parliament, and to share agreed actions. This was supplemented with thousands of letters written to various members of parliament and other key politicians and other 'power centres'. Their method, according to the former executive director of an environmental NGO interviewed, was 'Donald Rumsfeld, former American Secretary of Defense's, "shock and awe."'

The key local strategists in the Save Mabira Campaign focused their new media campaign on SMS. Mobile phones were just gaining currency and the majority of Ugandans did not own smart

phones. However, SMS was well known and used across the different socio-economic classes. 'We knew that very many Ugandans were hooked to their phones', said one communication strategist interviewed. At the same time, the activists knew that there would be serious consequences from government if any of them was identified as the source of the messages. The coalition therefore colluded with one of the large telecommunications companies to obtain a dedicated line that would guarantee them anonymity. The coalition designed a short message that read: 'Save Mabira Forest. Do not buy Lugazi sugar.' The message also urged people to pass it on to several others. The SMS message according to activists quickly went viral. This helped the coalition by-pass the challenges of internet connectivity and helped build momentum. It also ensured anonymity. Police started off by trying to trace the source/sources of the SMS. Eventually, according to several activists interviewed, they abandoned this and started forwarding the boycott message themselves.

Apart from websites, Facebook, Twitter, email and SMS, activists also utilized YouTube to post audio-visual information and persuasive material. In this the locally based activists were assisted by partners abroad who had better capacity to research, update and upload timely and accurate data.

### **The March**

The Save Mabira campaign came to a climax in a march on 27 April 2007 which paralysed business in parts of the capital city, Kampala. The march set out to cover over the 83 km from Kampala to Mabira Forest and attracted over 1,000 people according to the Global Non-Violent Action Database (2007). However, after a few kilometres, the march turned rowdy, with some protestors shouting racial slurs and shoving the police. Police shot in the air, causing a stampede. In the chaos that ensued, three lives were lost and several people injured. Over 20 activists, including the leaders, were arrested.

The Save Mabira campaign utilized the new media platforms, and in particular mobile phones, to great effect as a way of bypassing limitations on expression in the mainstream media. In the end government reversed its decision to give away the section of the protected forest (Global Voices, 2011).

The victory of the activists, was, however, short-lived. On August 13 2011, while addressing district leaders and agriculturalists, President Museveni resurrected the debate on Mabira when he announced once again that government would give away a section of Mabira Forest in the interest of development. He blamed the shortage of sugar in the country on the fact that environmental activists had blocked his plan to give away part of Mabira forest to facilitate growth of more sugar-cane in 2007. He referred to the activists as 'anti-development', 'economic saboteurs'.

This time, however, the activists were better prepared. The networks and mailing lists from 2007 were still in place. Several new Facebook groups came up and the discussion was more diffuse. Because many more people had acquired the means and skills to be active on the digital platforms, the coordination of the conversation was less centralized. Offline activities such as T-shirts, poster, bumper stickers, talk-shows, editorials etc. augmented the online campaign. With the help of their

partners, the Coalition released a study explaining the economic cost of the proposed forest land give-away (Nature Uganda 2011) and drafted a fresh petition. However, government withdrew its decision to give away the land before the petition was signed. For the second time, the give-away of part of Mabira forest was averted.

### **Achievement of the Save Mabira Campaign**

Taking the Mabira campaign online, according to Mubiru, managed to interest young people online in 'politics'. This carried on offline. 'The people who were not online received the message more than the people online [sic]. There were many people who, online, promised to join offline activities, but out of fear, just did not show up.' It took some persuasion. As Mubiru puts it, 'We explained to them that "without politics, you cannot have your lifestyle".' Eventually, there were many people saying the same thing. The diaspora became even more active on the social media, so the activists reached out to them. They developed a long 'befriend' list and started sending out email messages about meetings and strategy. Each time they sent out a message, they asked the people to reach out to their friends in the diaspora. This way, they built a large community. They also invited people to sign the petition and many did. They invited people to plant trees, and the NFA picked it up and started offering tree seedlings free of charge. The King of Buganda offered free land to SCOUL to save Mabira Forest.

It is important to note the synergies. Civil society had the message and the resources. The job of the online activists was to 'pickup civil society's message and disseminate it.' (S. Mubiru, Personal Communication, 11 May 2016.)

### **Challenges of the Mabira Campaign**

Digital activism in Uganda, as in many other developing nations, takes place among real challenges; online and offline. In 2011, government operatives joined the conversation online, mainly to ridicule and insult the activists into silence. Some messages contained threats like: 'Do you know who you are trying to challenge?' (referring to the president) and activists were threatened with 'disappearance'. Three of the key informants and several other people were arrested and questioned by the Criminal Investigation Department and the Inspector General of Police several times. They were accused of crimes ranging from inciting violence, inciting the public to loot, intent to overthrow the government of Uganda and treason. Many journalists were threatened, often with anonymous calls. As a result of this, one key informant said, 'There was a high attrition rate.'

## **THE WALK-TO-WORK PROTESTS OF 2011 AND THE 2016 ELECTIONS**

The 'walk-to-work protests' followed the 2011 presidential elections in Uganda where Kizza Besigye's FDC lost for the third time in a row to the incumbent, President Museveni. This loss,

and rising public anger against rising food prices, fiscal indiscipline and deteriorating service-delivery provided fertile ground for protest. The anger among the opposition was exacerbated by President Museveni's responding to complaints about rising fuel prices by advising people to be economical with fuel and not 'drive to bars'. In the words of Shawn Mubiru,..., 'Everyone was bruised.' The resultant unrest, and the opposition's repeated call to citizens to stand up for change in their leadership culminated in the 'walk-to-work' protests of 2011 (News, 2011).

The protests started with a meeting in Bunga, a suburb of Kampala which was attended by a small number of people. 'We wanted to engage government and make them respond to the concerns of the people', said one young activist interviewed. The group agreed to ride on the symbolism of Museveni's 'advice' and mobilise people to walk to work.

The easiest group to reach were politically like-minded people so one of the female activists called upon the FDC to mobilise to 'walk-to-work'. Because she was heading the communications of the FDC, it was difficult for her to coordinate this effort as well, so another member of parliament came in. The group initially brought on board several other key FDC and Democratic Party (DP) members. Finally, FDC publically came out and owned the campaign. The campaign then started shifting into the hands of politicians.

The 'walk-to-work' protests drew in Members of Parliament, religious leaders, civil society and people from all walks of life. Led by a coalition of opposition members named Action for Change (A4C), the protest walks started on 11 April. Besigye, Norbert Mao, the Head of the DP and several other protestors were arrested on the first day as police sought to stop the protests. The protests quickly turned violent as police faced off with civilians. Protestors were harassed and arrested several more times before the protests died down. According to various reports, 5–9 people died including a two-year-old girl who was shot in the head and chest by police. Because government was intent on stopping the 'walk-to-work' protests after the Mabira experience, many young activists who were not necessarily active politicians retreated to the online platforms to vent their disgruntlement with their country's governance and call for change.

### **The Campaign in the Media (2016)**

The 'walk-to-work' protests, coming four years after the Save Mabira protest, utilized all the digital media platforms used in the Save Mabira campaign and more extensively, attracting intervention by the statutory Communications Regulator, UCC. By this time many more Ugandans were connected to the internet and a large number owned mobile phones. At the height of the 'walk-to-work' protests, UCC instructed Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block access to Facebook and Twitter for 24 hours. This followed an earlier order where UCC had instructed telecom companies to block and regulate SMS (short message service) that could 'instigate hatred, violence and unrest' during the presidential election period. The regulator had flagged 18 words that constituted 'red flags' and were likely to invite surveillance or blockage. The words included 'Egypt', 'bullet', 'people-power', 'Tunisia', 'Mubarak', 'dictator', 'teargas', 'army', 'police', 'gun', 'Ben-Ali', 'UPDF' (which stands for the national army, the Uganda People's Defence Force) and some words in the

local languages (Biryabarema 2011). Although there is no sufficient documentation to show that any media organization complied with these directives, they sent a message to would-be digital activists that government was watching.

## THE 2016 ELECTIONS

The build up to the 2016 elections was particularly tense because President Museveni, who had been power for three decades, was standing against his long-time rival Kizza Besigye but also his former Prime Minister, Amama Mbabazi. The population was polarized. The issues raised by the FDC in 2011 were on the agenda again and were vigorously discussed on the social media. On 17 February, on the eve of Uganda's February 2016 polls, the Communications regulator once again instructed ISPs to switch off Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, as well as mobile money transfer services, again in the interests of 'public order'. President Museveni said the shutdown was intended as 'a security measure to avert lies...intended to incite violence and illegal declaration of election results'.

The ban was condemned by many as plain censorship. This time, though, Ugandans were able to get around the ban by using encrypted Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).

### **The Campaign in the Media (2016)**

The online campaign drew attention to the same issues as the 'walk-to-work' campaign had done, only this time amplified. Using their newly created Facebook page, My FDC, to launch their policy agenda the FDC articulated their commitment to democracy. They quoted president Museveni on key pronouncements and unfulfilled promises. They concentrated on ensuring that as they approached the 2016 election it was 'cool' to be associated with the FDC. They engaged a team of young people and trained them about keeping the message simple, clear and focused. 'We let them know that this was about the message, not just posting', said one communications strategist interviewed.

Because they were largely dealing with a young demographic— Uganda's population is the youngest in the world with 77 % aged below 30, the activists emphasized formatting, creativity and visuals. They used a multi-media approach, posting audio, photos, video clips etc. from the campaign trail. Using mobile phones, supporters posted many photographs and videos via WhatsApp with commentary, drawing attention to the issues of the campaign. They had people hold up posters of Kizza Besigye and take photographs with them which were then posted on Facebook. The party also posted their campaign programme online which raised curiosity and interest. There were daily updates and news flashes. All messages had a call to action. The most basic message was 'If you agree with this message, pass it on' and this, according to activists interviewed, did a lot to drive traffic to the FDC pages.



The campaign concentrated on the rural areas, with Besigye doing up to ten rallies a day, many of which were recorded and transmitted on multiple digital platforms. They made it a habit of posting 'thank you' notes for supporters in their own languages after each rally, which was significant in Uganda where there are different languages or dialects spoken in every region, many of which do not get space in the mainstream media.

The FDC online team also set up Twitter handles including #WesigeBesigye (Trust Besigye) and #Freemyvote. #WesigeBesigye in particular enabled aggregating of opinion and sharing. However, these were not as popular as the Facebook pages.

### **Challenges**

President Museveni won the 2016 election. Kizza Besigye, who came second, was placed under house arrest for over a month. During that time, he was unable to put together an election petition. The candidate that came third, former Prime Minister Amama Mbabazi petitioned the High Court and lost for lack of evidence. Since the conclusion of the 2016 elections, the social media have been switched on and off several times. There have been many arrests, and many opposition politicians are under surveillance. The memory of the social media shut-down is still fresh on peoples' memory and Ugandans are more aware of government surveillance in a previously relatively surveillance-free space. Activists interviewed think the shut-down had a significant impact on the elections. In the words of one of them, 'The shut-down really, really, really impacted on the outcome of the election...There was no money to buy internet bundles even if people had VPN. Teams were disconnected. Telephone services were jammed and there were many dropped calls. The shut-down created voter apathy. The opposition was discouraged....If the blockage had not happened, Museveni would have had to declare himself president by force'. (S. Mubiru, Personal conversation, 11 May 2016).

### **CONCLUSION**

The Save Mabira campaign in Uganda may be seen as a watershed. Coming in 2007, right after an election, and just as the most popular social media platforms took root in Uganda, the campaign opened up a new area for activism that drew in the hitherto younger and less vocal demographic of the country. For the most part, digital activism in Uganda since 2007 has been 'internet-enhanced rather internet-based' (Vegh 2003, p. 72), largely due to the fact that although there is a growing portion of the population able to access the internet, these are by no means the majority. Thus, for the foreseeable future, both from the sender and the receiver side, internet-based activism is only likely to involve a small portion of stakeholders. However, although one may not be able to say that the digital media are the new watchdog, at least one may refer to them as a new watchdog.

The findings of this chapter suggest that the most common type of activism in Uganda since 2007 has been Vegh's first type: awareness/ advocacy. This is the simplest type as it mostly involves making information available and ensuring it is widely disseminated. Hence the SMS

message in the Save Mabira Campaign, and the change message followed by 'If you believe this, pass it on' in the 2016 elections. In the initial stages, awareness raising and advocacy was most commonly done using websites and Facebook because (1) It was easy for the lead organisations like NAPE and ACODE to set up websites and link them with their wide NGO network and (2) Facebook was available to people on a range of devices, including relatively simple mobile phones. As digital activism in Uganda has evolved, activists have embraced WhatsApp, which considered 'dark' and is immensely popular with younger people, and YouTube which enables activists to bypass obstacles to broadcasting erected by government against the mainstream media, reaching many more people than they would have otherwise reached. A combination of YouTube and mobile phone technology also allows activists to receive footage from all their constituencies and make it available across geographical borders in a relatively short time.

Clearly, digital technology has had a liberating effect on a certain category of Ugandan society (mostly the young and educated). However, Ugandan digital activism is still plagued by the perennial logistical and structural barriers that Brodock (2010) and Hadji (2016) highlight. Most prominent among these obstacles has been government's increasingly direct intervention to block access to and use of the social media at peak political moments. Activists have mitigated some of the logistical obstacles by using VPNS. They have used the most accessible technologies to convey the basic message about the cause at hand (as in the case of the Mabira campaign) and left the more sophisticated discourse for Facebook, for instance. They have simplified and translated messages to make them accessible to more people; they have 'befriended' journalists to ensure constant (and favourable) coverage and they have utilized multimedia strategies to ensure the message gets to as many Ugandans as possible (as in the case of the 2016 campaigns). However, for as long as certain structures remain in place, subversion can only go so far, and using existing laws and extra-judicial means, government still has the potential to hold activism in check. While there may be what Hadji (2016, pp. 75–77) calls the revival of 'a dormant public consciousness into sentient, dynamic social discourse', therefore, the might of government has been demonstrated in the most unequivocal ways and is likely to have an impact on what risks the average Ugandan is willing to take in the name of digital activism.

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Monica B. Chibita is an Associate Professor and Head of Department at the Mass Communication Department, Uganda Christian University (UCU). She holds a D. Litt. et Phil. (Communication) (University of South Africa), an M.A. in Journalism (University of Iowa), and B.A/Education (Makerere University). She served in various capacities (Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Acting Head of Department) at Makerere University between 1994 and 2011, and has served on several boards including Uganda’s Broadcasting Council, the New Vision Printing and Publishing Corporation, the East African Communication Association (EACA) and the African Centre for Media Excellence. Her research interests are in the broad area of media and democracy with specific interest in regulation and participation. She is Associate Editor of the

Journal of African Media Studies (JAMS) and serves on the editorial boards of several other journals in the field.