

The digitalisation of democracy in the SADC region: Insights from the 2019 elections

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Aim, methodology & thesis of paper

Manifestations & significance of the digitalisation of democracy in SADC region

Role and impact of social media in 2019 elections

Desktop research – review of primary & secondary documents

- ❖ Social media and other internet-based technologies are opening up the political space for enhanced deliberative & participatory democracy, including giving voice to the youthful segment of the electorate
- ❖ Challenge of regulation & fake news phenomenon becoming a reality
- ❖ Business as usual politics + disillusioned but techno-savvy youth, a ticking time bomb in the region

Outline of presentation

- Concept and phenomenon of the digitalisation of democracy
- Internet and social media connectivity in Africa
- Social media & 2019 elections in the region
- Electoral politics in a digital age in the SADC region
- Conclusion & policy recommendations

Digitalisation of democracy - the concept

- Increasing use and effects of digital technologies on democratic processes
- E.g. use of smartphone applications and social media to organize elections, canvass for votes, debate political issues, monitor elections



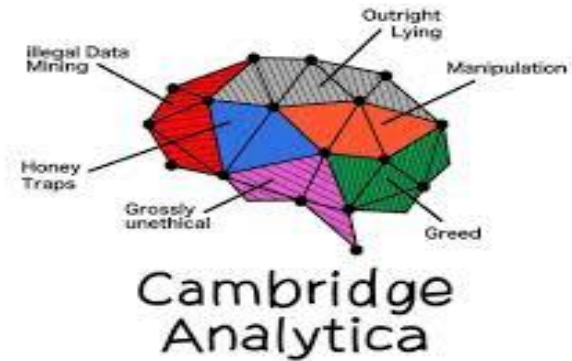
Digitalisation of democracy: the good

- Enhanced participation in political discourses through social media platforms
- Greater transparency & accountability of electoral processes through real-time monitoring
- Breaking the monopoly of incumbent governments over access to media channels for political messaging and vote-canvassing



Digitalisation of democracy: the bad

- Highly susceptible to abuse and manipulation
- Fake news phenomenon
- Used to spread hate speech and exacerbate political polarization

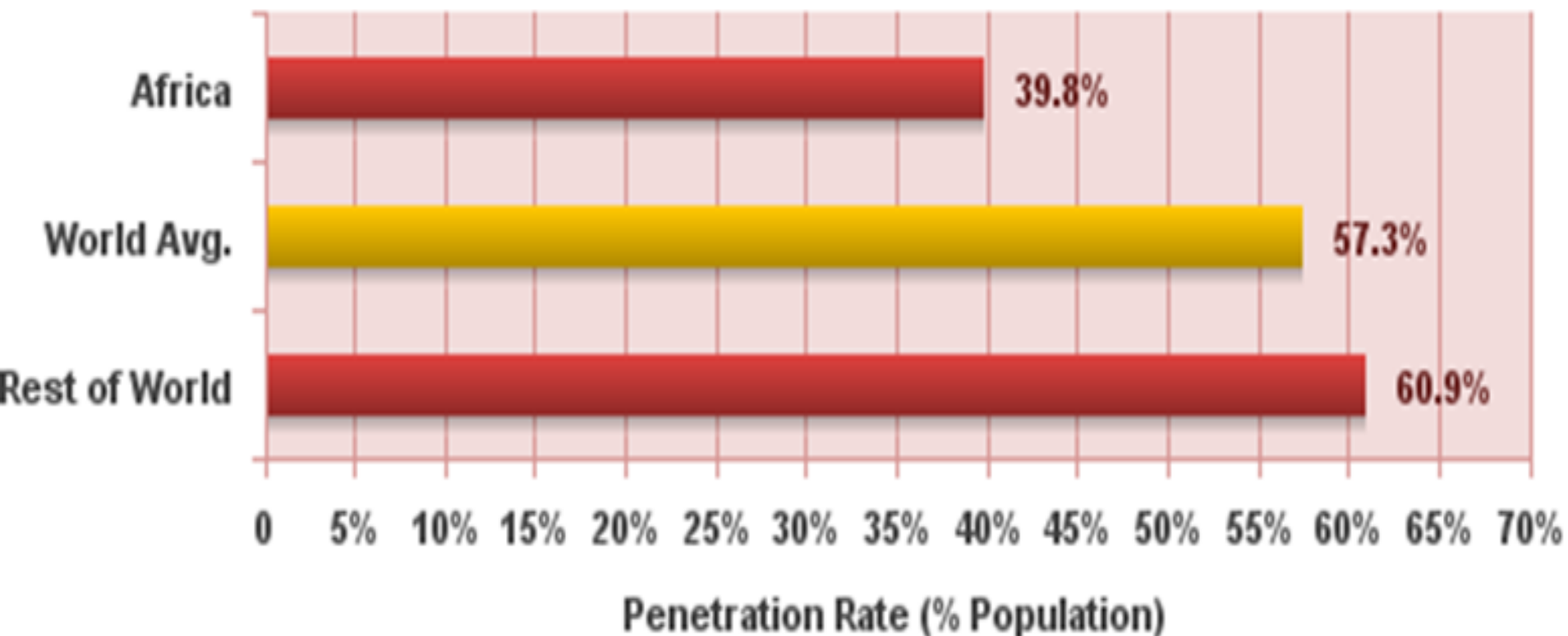


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forbes.com/cartoons



Internet Penetration in Africa

June 30, 2019



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm

525,148,631 estimated Internet users in Africa in June 30, 2019 and

4,422,494,622 Internet users in all the World in June 30, 2019

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SOCIAL MEDIA PENETRATION BY REGION

TOTAL ACTIVE ACCOUNTS ON THE TOP SOCIAL NETWORK IN EACH COUNTRY, COMPARED TO POPULATION



Social media & 2019 elections in SA

- Social media space dominated by the big 3 – ANC, DA & EFF
- Disconnect between party social media presence/activism & results
- Low youth turnout despite strong social media engagement
- Low incidence of digital misinformation or manipulation



Social media & 2019 elections in Malawi

- New technologies energized youth to active role in elections
- Social media & greater access to information & communication channels for political parties
- High incidence of social media fake news
- Internet blackout for six hours after polls closed



Social media & 2019 elections in Mozambique

- Innovative use of internet-based technologies in democratic politics
- Use of mobile phone apps & digital platforms by CSOs for real-time monitoring of elections
- 10-day ultimatum for mobile phone operators to register SIM cards seen as attempt to curtail social media activism



Dr. Meng coordinates the Crossmedia Tracking Center (CMTC) during the Ghanaian 2016 elections



Social media & 2019 elections in Botswana

- Social media as vehicle for political polarization
- Use of social media to democratize media access & level electoral playing field
- Facebook & Twitter as campaign tools to communicate to & mobilise electorate



Electoral politics in a digital age in SADC region

- SADC remains wedded to low intensity democracy promotion
- Revised *Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections & SEOMs* pay little attention to role of social media



Electoral politics in a digital age in SADC region

- Election outcomes leave status quo largely unchanged
- Growing disillusionment with electoral politics
- Social media as potentially destabilizing avenues for expressing dissent & mobilizing against government failings



Averting the tipping point

- Ruling class in the region to rethink its interests and align its politics with the socio-economic needs and democratic aspirations of their populations
- Need fair regulation of social media
- Invest in ICT infrastructure and cheap internet-based devices to bridge digital divide
- Mainstream and prioritize digital literacy in civic and voter education campaigns
- SADC should update its Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections to recognise the growing role of social media in electoral processes, and encourage fair access to and use of social media during elections

Thank you!



Questions