

WhatsApp campaigning replicates existing political structures in Ghana and Nigeria, study shows

August 14 2023



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Existing patrimonial political structures in Ghana and Nigeria are being replicated as campaigning moves to WhatsApp, analysis shows.

The empowerment of new actors is being restricted in social media and it is not being used to challenge pre-existing power dynamics.

Digital spaces have allowed new people to enter the political/campaigning arena, but they are often incorporated into existing structures of power rather than disrupting the whole system.

The study shows WhatsApp campaigning in Nigeria is driven and shaped by individuals with loose direction from party officials, whereas in Ghana [political parties](#) have greater control.

Researchers found more formal online structures in Ghana, with tighter control of messaging and strategy. In Nigeria there was less internal coherence, and campaign messaging focused more on the fortunes of individual candidates.

The study, by Elena Gadjanova from the University of Exeter, Jonathan Fisher and Jamie Hitchen, both from the University of Birmingham, has been published in *Party Politics*.

Researchers carried out 113 interviews and 15 focus group discussions with [political candidates](#), their campaign teams and advisers, and party activists in both countries. The focus of this research was principally on the presidential races.

They found that Ghana's two main political parties have developed a complex and hierarchical social media communications structure and have integrated WhatsApp within this in order to connect national-level executives with office holders and candidates at the regional, constituency, and ward levels. This structure extends to the most remote and rural parts of the country.

Dr. Gadjanova said, "Intra-party messaging over WhatsApp was carefully monitored by group administrators and party activists to ensure adherence to the party line. This has discouraged the worst attempts at disinformation. The strength of the opposing party's 'social media army' acted as a deterrent to disseminating outright lies. This also extended to messaging that could be easily presented by opponents as ethnically divisive and destabilizing. In Ghana's north, this was most evident when it came to chieftaincy disputes."

In Ghana, securing a permanent position within the party was cited as a primary motivation by young tech-savvy men who had volunteered to create social media content for local politicians prior to the 2020 election.

While Ghana's "big two" political parties were able to reap the benefits of their prior institutionalization for harnessing the potential of WhatsApp for organizing, fundraising, and connecting to voters, the smaller parties struggled. Interviewees from two of Ghana's smaller political parties (the Convention People's Party and People's National Convention) described falling victim to online scams and impersonations, being subject to organized and coordinated disinformation campaigns, having members defect to the NDC and NPP but remain in WhatsApp groups as "spies," and having their messages "drowned out" by the social media armies of the big parties. The CPP and PNC lacked the extensive organizational structures that could be doubled up on WhatsApp, the capacity to monitor online

communication, and the resources to recruit and retain digital communicators.

Jonathan Fisher said, "The organizational and communications structures established by Nigeria's major political parties on WhatsApp have tended to lack coherence and stability, both in terms of messaging and personnel. They have tended to reflect and build on the continued power of individuals and 'godfathers' in Nigerian politics and the prominence of informality in political structures."

By 2018, when its well-equipped Abuja headquarters was opened, the ruling party-affiliated Buhari Media Centre had put in place structures that could potentially reach over 200,000 individuals directly through a series of predominantly open WhatsApp groups. There was, however, very limited vetting of individuals who joined, and it was accepted that in these more public groups "opposition spies" were likely present. But they presented a network through which political actors could reach Nigerians all over the country almost instantaneously with a similar message. A degree of monitoring was provided by group administrators. But this was less about controlling the message, or aligning with a particular party line, and more about positioning the candidate positively with voters.

Unlike in Ghana, a premium on the accuracy and credibility of the information was not a feature of much of the content created within LGA or state-level groups, nor was there any effort to sanction those responsible for sharing falsehoods. Even though messages were often simply forwarded from elsewhere, the fact that many individuals outside of party-affiliated groups received the content directly from a trusted source—a friend, relative or community leader—was important in establishing its credibility, even if it was false.

Jamie Hitchen said, "The rise of [social media](#) has certainly led to the

creation of new campaign structures in both countries, and has introduced a new set of young, tech-savvy actors into the equation. In neither case, though, do we find that the former has created space for the latter to challenge the status quo, or to secure significant influence in what is often a party system dominated by party barons—in Ghana—and political 'godfathers' and their coteries in Nigeria."

More information: Jonathan Fisher et al, WhatsApp and political communication in West Africa: Accounting for differences in parties' organization and message discipline online, *Party Politics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/13540688231188690](https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688231188690)

Provided by University of Exeter

Citation: WhatsApp campaigning replicates existing political structures in Ghana and Nigeria, study shows (2023, August 14) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-08-whatsapp-campaigning-replicates-political-ghana.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.