



Big tech's role in African elections: A double-edged sword

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Abstract: Global technology giants are shaping the future of African politics in complex and myriad ways. Big tech offers powerful tools to engage citizens and enhance democracy. However, tighter regulation and greater accountability is needed to combat voter manipulation, misinformation and privacy concerns.

Nigeria's February general election kicked off a busy year for African politics with more than a [dozen African countries](#) holding leadership contests in 2023. Mauritania and Puntland went to the polls in May, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone in June, Zimbabwe and Gabon in August, Liberia and Mali held their ballot in October, Madagascar in November, Togo and the Democratic Republic of Congo in December. Those elections will show whether democracy is flourishing or not amid the continent's various crises. However, one increasingly relevant question is how big tech companies influence elections.

[Big tech companies](#) have a considerable international presence and play a pivotal role in shaping the technology industry, the global economy and our daily lives. These heavyweights exert major influence across various sectors such as technology, communications, e-commerce, software development and online

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services, and include Google, Facebook, Apple, Twitter, YouTube and newcomer Tiktok. Tech giants [impact elections](#) in various ways, both directly and indirectly, but there are challenges as well as benefits and whether that impact is positive or negative can be highly context-dependent.

Powerful tools to engage and influence voters

Voter engagement and mobilisation are key ingredients of any election and as such, big tech packs substantial punch. Technology can facilitate [voter engagement](#) efforts by providing platforms for voter registration, information on candidates and policies, plus cutting edge tools for organisation and mobilisation. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, have been widely used by political actors and citizens in Africa to mobilise supporters, disseminate information and discuss issues. During elections, these platforms have boosted the spread of campaign messages and organisation of political events and rallies. They have also provided alternative avenues for citizens, activists, and political candidates to share their views, organise campaigns and engage directly with voters. Social media played a key part in the 2011 [Egyptian revolution](#) and subsequent elections in these respects. Big tech companies have collaborated with civil society organisations to develop digital tools to enhance monitoring and ensure transparency during elections. The Kenyan elections in 2013 and 2017 witnessed various tech-driven initiatives, such as crowd-funded election monitoring platforms and mobile applications to track and report incidents of electoral fraud and irregularities. The Kenya Elections Transparency and Integrity (KETI) Alliance created the online platform [Uchaguzi](#), powered by Ushahidi, to crowdsource and map reports of election-related incidents. Mobile applications and websites, such as Google's 'Google for Nigeria' and 'Google for Kenya', have been developed to provide localised information on voter registration, polling stations, candidate profiles and election results. Tech companies have also collaborated with civil society organisations to promote voter registration and supply election-related information. Another largely positive aspect to the big tech story is the rise of information sharing and [citizen journalism](#). In many African countries, traditional media outlets face limitations and restrictions. Social media platforms have provided uncensored outlets for citizen journalists and activists to share firsthand accounts of political events, offering a broader dissemination of information during elections. African citizens have used platforms like Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook to provide real-time updates, share videos and photos, and discuss political events, increasing transparency and accountability during elections.

Online platforms also help [political advertising](#) reach a huge audience. Micro-targeting - political adverts tailored to specific demographics and interests - has both the wide reach and the precision to shape public opinion and influence voter behaviour. Social media has already played a crucial role in African politics with candidates in the February 2023 [Nigerian presidential election](#) using Facebook and Twitter for advertising and engagement.

However, some online tools have negative aspects. [Content distribution and algorithms](#) used by these platforms determine what content users see in their feeds. This can create filter bubbles or echo chambers where users are exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, potentially narrowing perspectives and diversity of voter opinion.

Data privacy and national security concerns

Tech companies also assist in [data analysis](#). Big tech companies have access to vast amounts of user data, which can be utilised by political campaigns for targeted messaging and voter analysis. Data analytics techniques help campaigns understand voter behaviour, identify swing voters, and optimise strategies accordingly. However, collection and use of personal data raises privacy concerns, particularly when it comes to targeted political messaging. The extensive data analytics capabilities of these companies can enable highly personalised and potentially manipulative campaigns that may infringe individuals' privacy rights. Additionally, tech companies play a crucial role in safeguarding the security and integrity of elections. They work with governments and election authorities to protect against cyber threats, implement security measures, and prevent foreign interference in electoral processes. However, how effectively and ethically they do this remains a point of [contention](#) in many African elections.

Some tech companies have been accused of undermining the sovereignty of African states because they lack domestic regulation and oversight. [Facebook remains closed](#) in Uganda due to such allegations. Absence of accountability has led to issues such as inadequate content moderation, insufficient measures to combat misinformation or challenges in protecting user data while lack of robust regulation undermines the integrity and transparency of electoral processes in Africa. Big tech companies also face challenges dealing with the spread of [misinformation and disinformation](#) whereby false information, misleading narratives, and propaganda can be rapidly disseminated through social media platforms, potentially swaying public opinion and distorting the electoral process. African elections share the global problem of fake news, manipulated images, and misleading narratives which circulate rapidly, potentially influencing voter opinions and impacting electoral outcomes. Efforts to combat misinformation and promote media literacy have been undertaken by both tech companies and local organisations. For example, Facebook [partnered](#) with fact-checking organisations in Africa to identify and label false news stories during their respective national elections, in an effort to promote accurate information and minimise the impact of false narratives on voter opinions. Tech companies have taken measures to combat misinformation, but it remains a complicated ongoing challenge.

Way forward

The impact of big tech companies on African elections is complex and multifaceted with both positive and negative implications. Specific dynamics can vary significantly

from one country to another, depending on factors such as internet penetration, social media usage, regulatory frameworks and the political landscape within each country. While they provide valuable platforms for political expression and engagement, challenges related to misinformation, privacy, and access to technology persist. Big tech geographical expansion is profit-driven and overregulation can cause substantial backlash.

While their influence on African elections continues to evolve as technological advancements and digital connectivity expand across the continent, we need to ensure proper accountability. This requires a multi-stakeholder approach with active participation from governments, tech companies, civil society, and citizens to ensure that technology benefits African societies while upholding ethical standards and protecting individual rights. Moreover, digital media literacy, Africa-specific moderators and balanced policy reforms for proper accountability are all vital.