BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE:

Enhancing Civic Engagement through Internet Access in Uganda

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Highlights

Digital Divide: Limited Internet access, affecting 75.4% of Ugandans, restricts civic engagement, especially among marginalized communities.

Misinformation Impact: Widespread misinformation undermines the credibility and effectiveness of online civic activities.

Digital Literacy Gaps: Uneven digital literacy hinders effective participation in online civic engagement, particularly in rural and older populations.

Weak Regulatory Frameworks: Insufficient enforcement and censorship concerns weaken the effectiveness of current Internet usage regulations in civic spaces.

Key Recommendations: Expand Internet infrastructure, strengthen regulations against misinformation, boost public awareness, and enhance digital literacy to improve civic engagement through the Internet in Uganda.

75.4% Of Ugandans are affected by limited Internet access

Executive Summary

The Internet has become a transformative tool for enriching civic engagement in Uganda, offering opportunities to bridge geographical gaps, providing a platform for diverse opinions, and facilitating the rapid dissemination of information. This digital medium empowers citizens with the ability to access critical information, engage in meaningful dialogue, and participate in the struggle for advocacy. However, the effectiveness of the Internet in improving civic engagement in Uganda is constrained by several challenges, including misinformation and disinformation, which undermine the credibility of online activities, creating obstacles for genuine discourse and accountability. The digital divide, characterized by unequal access to technology and Internet services, particularly affects marginalized communities, limiting their participation in online civic activities. Additionally, varying levels of digital literacy contribute to uneven engagement, with some individuals struggling to navigate and utilize online platforms effectively.

The digital divide, characterized by unequal access to technology and Internet services, particularly affects marginalized communities

Addressing these issues is crucial to create a more inclusive and effective civic engagement space, where all citizens have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the democratic process. Policy options include infrastructure development and Internet access expansion, regulation and policy

frameworks, public awareness campaigns, and digital literacy and education programs. Investing in infrastructure development and expanding Internet access can bridge the digital divide, while enhancing regulations and policy frameworks can protect freedom of expression and ensure transparency in online civic spaces. Improving public awareness campaigns and strengthening digital literacy and education programs can equip citizens with the skills needed for effective online engagement and critical evaluation of information.

Digital literacy and education programs can equip citizens with the skills needed for effective online engagement

Introduction

Citizen involvement is crucial for a thriving democracy, enabling people to actively shape the development and governance of their communities. In Uganda, the Internet has emerged as a transformative tool for enriching civic engagement. It offers unmatched opportunities by bridging geographical gaps, providing a platform for a diverse range of opinions, and facilitating the rapid dissemination of information. This digital medium empowers citizens with the ability to access critical information, engage in meaningful dialogue, and participate in the struggle for advocacy. The Internet also betters communication among stakeholders, fosters broader outreach, and supports real-time feedback, which can significantly improve government responsiveness and accountability.

Despite its transformative potential, the effectiveness of the Internet in improving civic engagement in Uganda is constrained by several challenges including misinformation and disinformation which undermine the credibility of online activities, creating obstacles for genuine discourse and accountability. The digital divide, characterized by unequal access to technology and Internet services, particularly affects marginalized communities, limiting their participation in online civic activities. Additionally, varying levels of digital literacy contribute to uneven engagement, with some individuals struggling to navigate and utilize online platforms effectively. These barriers highlight the need for targeted strategies to maximize the Internet's role in promoting inclusive and active civic involvement. This brief explores the ways in which the Internet can be used to improve civic engagement in Uganda and address the key obstacles that currently limit its effectiveness.

Citizen involvement is crucial for a thriving democracy, enabling people to actively shape the development and governance of their communities

Context Analysis

In recent years, Uganda has experienced a considerable increase in Internet adoption and social media usage, changing the background of civic involvement. As of 2023, 11.7 million Ugandans have Internet connection, representing approximately 27% of the population[1], with 2.5 million actively utilizing social media platforms. This digital transformation has given citizens powerful means for raising their concerns, sharing communal issues, and demanding responsibility from authorities. For example, the #KampalaPotholeExhibition successfully raised public awareness of the state of Kampala's roads, prompting the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) to commit Shs 6 billion for road repairs in response to government`s directives[2] similarly, the #UgandaHealthExhibition raised important challenges in the healthcare sector, advocating for reforms in hospital conditions and medical staff welfare[3].

Some people have actively used ICT to track and evaluate government projects and services, demanding accountability.

A study by CIPESA indicates the popularity of internet-enabled mobile phones has significantly increased access to and use of ICT services. This has expanded the number of ways people can connect online, not only for communication but also for accessing news and information that empowers them to participate in social, economic, and political activities. Some people have actively used ICT to track and evaluate government projects and services, demanding accountability. They've done this by calling, emailing, and using social media to contact government officials. However, few people have used ICT for this purpose, and government officials often don't respond to their inquiries[4].

1   https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-uganda
2   https://www.newvision.co.ug/category/museveni-orders-release-of-sh6b-for-city-road-NV_158600
3   https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/ugandans-showcase-poor-health-sector-on-social-me-dia-4210316
4   https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/publications/Knowledge-Attitudeand-Practices_Civic-Participa-tion-and-ICT-use-in-Uganda.pdf

Some significant obstacles include the digital divide, with only 5% of rural dwellers having Internet access against 23% of urban dwellers, limiting a balance in civic involvement.[5] The percentage of internet users in the western region (6.3%) was notably lower than in the eastern region (9.7%), both of which fell below the national average. Additionally, the proportion of female internet users also lagged behind the national figure, highlighting significant regional and gender disparities in internet access across Uganda.

Considering these factors is critical for devising effective means to strengthen the Internet's role in civic engagement in Uganda. Addressing these difficulties would enable digital platforms reach their full potential, ensuring a more informed and involved citizenry.

Problem Statement

Despite the significant potential of social media to enhance civic engagement in Uganda, several challenges impede its effectiveness. Online platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter) spaces and digital campaigns, have mobilized public opinion and drawn attention from the duty bearers. However, these efforts are frequently undermined by misinformation, which compromises the credibility and impact of digital activism. Disinformation is the spread of false information which has hindered the effectiveness of online campaigns, making it harder to hold authorities accountable and spur meaningful action. Additionally, the digital divide which is characterized by uneven access to technology and varying levels of digital literacy, further limits the engagement by the marginalized communities. As a result, while social media has the power to drive civic involvement, these barriers must be addressed to enhance the integrity and inclusiveness of online civic initiatives.

Disinformation is the spread of false information which has hindered the effectiveness of online campaigns

At the start of 2023, 75.4% of Uganda's population remained offline[6] highlighting a huge gap that can possibly affect civic participation on online platforms. This shows the need for more efforts to improve digital literacy and accessibility to ensure that all citizens can engage meaningfully in democratic processes. To overcome these limitations, it is crucial to address the issues around misinformation, disinformation and the structural issues influencing the digital divide. Implementing measures to eliminate misinformation and ensure accurate information dissemination is essential for maintaining the credibility of online civic activities. Concurrently, bridging the digital divide by improving Internet access and digital literacy, particularly for the underserved groups is important for improving civic engagement and participation via online platforms. By tackling these issues, Uganda can use the Internet's full potential to create a more inclusive and effective civic engagement space, where all citizens have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to democratic processes.

Policy Options

Enhancing ICT Infrastructure and Internet Access: Expanding Internet infrastructure is key to bridging Uganda's digital divide, but its progress has been affected by high costs of implementation, investment gaps, regulatory hurdles, and inadequate maintenance models. These issues prevent widespread of reliable Internet access, limiting civic engagement opportunities especially for the citizens in the underserved communities.

Expanding Internet infrastructure is key to bridging Uganda's digital divide

Regulation and Policy Frameworks: Uganda's efforts to regulate online civic engagement are hindered by ineffective laws, limited enforcement, and concerns about censorship. The Computer Misuse Act, UCC Regulations, and Data Protection and Privacy Act often lack clarity, resources, and enforcement mechanisms. This allows harmful content to multiply and undermines the integrity of online discourse. To improve this situation, Uganda needs to revise these laws, strengthen enforcement, and promote transparency and accountability in online regulation.

Public Awareness Campaigns: Campaigns such as the cybersecurity and internet safety awareness campaign, digital rights awareness campaign, which aim at raising awareness about digital rights, Cybersecurity and civic engagement but face challenges such as poorly targeted messages, lack of sustained efforts, and limited resources. These issues result in reduced impact and effectiveness in implementing long-term civic participation.

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5   https://www.nita.go.ug/sites/default/files/2022-12/National%20IT%20Survey%20Report%202022%20-%20Final.pdf

6   https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-uganda

Digital Literacy and Education Programs: Empowering citizens to effectively navigate and engage in digital initiatives. However, these programs such as the ICT clubs schools' initiative, community ICT training centers often struggle due to limited funding, inadequate curricula, and low engagement among target demographics, especially in rural and older populations.

Empower citizens to effectively navigate and engage in digital initiatives

Recommendations

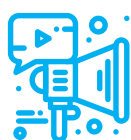**Government investment in ICT Infrastructure Development to Expand Internet Access:** There is need to bridge the digital divide by enhancing Internet infrastructure and improving connectivity quality in the rural and underserved areas. There should be deliberate effort to encourage private sector investment in the ICT infrastructure and to streamline regulatory processes to make Internet access more affordable and widespread.

Enhance Regulation and Policy Frameworks: There is need for government to develop and enforce stronger regulations against misinformation and disinformation while protecting the freedom of expression. Investment in technology for monitoring misinformation and disinformation will ensure transparent and effective enforcement to maintain trust in online civic spaces.

Improve Public Awareness Campaigns: Government needs to create targeted, sustained public awareness campaigns with clear messaging and multi-channel outreach. Collaboration with local organizations and the utilization of social media will increase campaign visibility, and establish feedback mechanisms to continuously improve engagement strategies.

Government needs to create targeted, sustained public awareness campaigns with clear messaging and multi-channel outreach

Strengthen Digital Literacy and Education Programs by government: Improving digital literacy through increasing funding to expand access to training centers, enhance the education curriculum to meet digital demands, ensure the availability of resources like computers, reliable internet and electricity. Integrate digital literacy into schools and communities to equip citizens with the skills needed for effective online engagement and critical evaluation of information. This will improve both the volume and quality of online engagement by the citizens.

Conclusion

The Internet holds huge potential to transform civic engagement in Uganda, offering opportunities for greater participation, communication, and advocacy. However, the effective use of this digital tool is hindered by significant challenges such as misinformation, disinformation and the significant digital divide due to the discrepancy in ICT infrastructure development and the varying levels of digital literacy across the population. Addressing these issues is critical towards attaining the full potential of the Internet towards creating more inclusive and participatory civic engagement processes. By investing in ICT infrastructure development, enhancing regulations to combat misinformation, improving public awareness campaigns, and strengthening digital literacy programs, Uganda can bridge the gaps that currently limit civic engagement over the Internet. These steps will not only improve the effectiveness of online civic initiatives but also ensure that all citizens, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location, can contribute meaningfully to the democratic processes of the country. As Uganda moves forward, addressing these challenges with targeted and sustained efforts will be essential for creating a more equitable and vibrant civic landscape, where the Internet serves as a powerful catalyst for positive change and democratic participation.

Addressing these issues is critical towards attaining the full potential of the Internet towards creating more inclusive and participatory civic engagement processes.