

Contesting democracy in the digital age: Disinformation, hate speech, and technology-enabled security threats during Kenya's 2022 general elections

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ABSTRACT

Social media use during elections has laid bare the opportunities and risks it portends for democracy and peace, especially for many consolidating democracies in Africa, such as Kenya. While digital democracy, defined as “the use of digital media in political and governance processes” has expanded the democratic space through increased participation, the digital space has also been used to spread disinformation and hate messages and have polarized populations and exacerbate the potential for conflict, particularly in charged political processes like elections. Interrogating Kenya's 2022 General Election, this article aims at unpacking digital democracy as a tool that could threaten peace prior, during and after elections. It sought to answer three questions: How did disinformation polarize the electorate during Kenya's 2022 General Elections? How did hate messages polarize the electorate and threaten peace during Kenya's 2022 General Elections? How successful was government in regulating/sanctioning digital democracy violators during Kenya's 2022 elections? Theoretically, this article is anchored in digital participatory democracy, and biased towards a qualitative approach. It adopted a case study design, and targeted University of Eldoret students and their peers, purposely targeted as youthful and most active users of social media. Primary data used was based on an online google form questionnaire deployed in August-September 2023, which attracted 311 respondents, an email e-mail questionnaire (7 responses), key informant online interviews (2 responses) and two (2) focus group discussions (FDGs). Key informant interviews targeting government officials especially from criminal justice system and findings corroborated with secondary academic and grey literature. It concludes that elections being very emotive and disputed in Kenya means digital democracy is a double-edged sword and has the potential to threaten peace during charged political contests, and where online polarization and hatred may manifest offline as real violence. Acknowledging the delicate balancing act of government in regulating digital democracy without curtailing individual freedoms, this article calls for sensitization on responsibilities of various actors in the digital space, with a view to harness digital democracy through responsible use of social media.

Keywords: Digital Democracy, Disinformation, Polarization, Peace, Social Media

I. INTRODUCTION

While social media has been credited for encouraging citizen-participation, it has equally been used to spread disinformation, misinformation and hate speech. According to Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2020), the online ecosystem is designed to attract user attention and not deliberate cognition and independent choice hence creating an environment where false information could easily spread. The result is a deeply polarized society, with extreme views, and which could create an environment prone to conflict and violence, especially during charged political competitions like elections.

The explosive rise in the number of social media users is redefining how citizens and governments interact. While social media and internet is expected to expand the digital democracy space, disinformation and hate speech especially during elections, has the potential to threaten peace through incitement to electoral related violence. Although the digitization of the electoral processes by Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) was expected to promote voter confidence and enhance transparency and accountability, it has equally led to accusation of digital rigging of elections (Nyabola, 2018). The low voter confidence in previous electoral management bodies where electoral processes were manual, demonstrates how offline behaviours find their way into online platforms. Aggressive and polarizing digital content on elections in various social media platforms therefore provide fodder through which electoral disputes online may manifest offline and threaten peace.

During Kenya's presidential General Election of 2022, politicians and the electorate used Facebook, WhatsApp and X (former Twitter) for campaign messaging, mobilization of their political bases and to spread propaganda. The voter registration and identification were also done through the Kenya Integrated Electoral Management System (KIEMS), partially digitizing the electoral process. The stakes that the digital democracy

provided were so high that the civil society piled pressure on the Government of Kenya (GoK) to make a commitment that it will not shut down the internet prior, during and after elections, which she did (Paradigm Initiative, 2022). Consequently, the 2022 August General election sparked one of the most robust social media campaigns, with Kenya Kwanza and Azimio coalitions unleashing propaganda of untold proportions online, to outdo their political competitors. As a consolidating democracy, Kenya is largely seen as upholding media and political freedoms, and the GoK often finds itself in an uncharted territory —where they must tame cybercrime like hate speech, impersonation, falsification and disinformation that threaten peace —without being seen as limiting freedoms that are envisaged in the Constitution of Kenya 2010 which is progressive and envisages democracy. This paper sought to interrogate the manifestation of disinformation and hate speech during Kenya's 2022 elections and their potential to breach peace, against the backdrop of GoK response in taming digital democracy violators.

This article adopts a definition by Hacker and van Dijk (2000, p.1) who define digital democracy as “a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using information and communication technology (ICT) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) instead, as an addition, not a replacement of traditional ‘analogue’ political practices”. While digital democracy may be practiced in several other platforms, it is in social media spaces that participation is robust and more engaging. Theoretically, this article conceptualizes digital democracy as the use of digital technologies to promote idea of open government (Noveck, 2016) and open democracy (Landemore, 2020). It adopted a pragmatist paradigm and a mixed-methods approach, with a bias towards qualitative approach. While studies have explored the potential for digital democracy to enhance participation (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020); and the risks of digital media especially on established democracies, including polarization (Beaufort, 2018; Lorenz-Spreen et al, 2023), few studies have been done on Africa, and results remain inconclusive and contested.

In Kenya, like in many parts of the world, the use of digitally-enabled social networking sites, here referred to as social media, has been credited for increased political participation. Kamau (2017) however argues that while social media such as Facebook had increased political participation among university students aged between 18-35 years in Kenya, its influence was limited and that it had not radically transformed political engagement. This argument by Kamau may have now significantly changed, considering the robust social media mobilization that led to Kenya anti-Finance Bill 2024 mass protests in mid-2024 (Gachuki, 2024), and which threatened her political stability and constitutional order. While digital democracy activists initially pushed for government accountability mostly online, the June 2024 anti-Finance Bill protests demonstrated a significant shift in offline behaviour, where hundreds of thousands of people came out to protest, in what Twinomurizi (2024) has termed as “from tweets to the streets”. There is therefore an increasing need to re-evaluate implication of digital democracy in political and governance spaces in Kenya and broadly Africa, especially with regard to hotly contested elections, and its nexus to peace.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

While digital technology continues to disrupt our way of life in unprecedented ways, it is during elections that the disruption holds the greatest risks that if not managed well could easily cause electoral conflict and destabilize consolidating democracies like Kenya. Although digital democracy can encourage citizen participation in decision making process, it also provides authoritarian regimes with an additional toolkit for repression, surveillance and social control. The increasing number of African countries that limit social media use or shutdown internet during elections is a demonstration that governments with authoritarian tendencies are likely to continue weaponizing the internet to suppress citizen voices. Kenya, like many other African countries are also yet to fully roll out a robust privacy and data protection framework amid the growing digitization of services, including electoral processes (Mosero, 2022).

1.2 Research Questions

- i. What are the challenges of digital democracy as manifested in 2022 Kenya's general elections?
- ii. How did digital democracy, mostly exercised through social media, promote peace during 2022 general election?
- iii. How did Government of Kenya respond on digital democracy mis(use) during 2022 general elections?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Theoretically, this article is anchored in digital participatory democracy, which recognizes the role of digital tools in enhancing citizen participation in democratic processes, while acknowledging challenges such as digital divide that privileges some, concern on data privacy and security and algorithm bias (Stubbs, 2023).

2.1.1 Digital Participatory Democracy

Digital participatory democracy is the use of digital tools to engage citizens in public policy and decision making (Stubbs, 2023). While the definition of digital democracy varies considerably, and borrows heavily from the concepts of participatory and deliberative democracies, this article adopted digital democracy use as participatory democracy, while acknowledging that digital participatory democracy may be abused, as the case may be with digital democracy fascism (Fuchs, 2026).

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Digital Democracy Challenges

Roy (2025) argue that the transformative impact of digital democracy hinges on addressing digital divides, enhancing digital literacy, and fostering inclusive access to digital platforms, ensuring that all citizens can actively participate in the democratic process. This statement encapsulates the future implications highlighted by the study and emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to overcome barriers to digital democracy.

Despite the immense potential of digital technology tools and social media to promote peace, various actors misuse them posing a security risk especially during elections. Malicious actors are using digital threats to skew the polls (Watson & Habte, 2024). This compromises on the role of digital democracy on the elections. The introduction of technologies has added an additional layer to these risks, giving rise to both election-related abuse on social media platforms and the employment of social media platforms to fuel violence in offline spaces (Dad & Khan, 2023). These digital threats pose a problem everywhere; their consequences have an even greater impact in fragile democracies, many of which are in sub-Saharan Africa (Watson & Habte, 2024). In Kenya, despite the voting exercise taking place without a hitch, the 2017 General Election results were dismissed by various stakeholders who called on the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) to 'open the servers', with witnesses, to use the results inside the servers to verify the ballot papers in the ballot boxes (Omwoha, 2022). This was a setback to the role of digital democracy as a precursor to peaceful elections.

Whereas Kenya is one of the countries with advanced adoption of digital technologies in Africa, a failure by the main opposition party, the Azimio coalition, to accept digitally transmitted presidential results of 2022 (Kimeu, 2022) demonstrates digitalization as controversial issue. The results which were transmitted via Kenya Integrated Electoral Management System (KIEMS) kits remain a sticky issue and is yet to gain adequate public trust. This is not any different from 2017 results which were highly disputed with claims of digital rigging of votes, with the recruitment of Cambridge Analytica by one of the contestants (Nyabola, 2018) further fuelling tensions around the 2017 elections and the role of technology (Nyabola, 2018). This study aims at contributing to the theoretical and policy aspects of digital democracy with a focus on 2022 presidential elections in Kenya. While it does not aim at generalizing its findings to other African contexts, it will offer entry points within which digital democracy may be harnessed and digital dictatorship countered for sustainable peace.

2.2.2 Digital Democracy Participation and Peace

Enhanced digital democracy participation while positive and transformative may need to be robustly guided to avoid euphoric negative reactions that could breach peace. The storming of Capitol Hill in Washington DC in January 2021 by populists and white supremacists was partly blamed on disinformation spread mainly in social media (Jeppesen et al, 2022). Kenya's anti-Finance Bill 2024 mass protests of mid-June 2024, which culminated in the breaching of parliament, and dozens of protesters killed was also mobilised mainly on social media, especially on X platform, formally Twitter (Gachuki, 2024; Omweri, 2024). This view is shared by Kovacs, Cofas and Delcea (2024) who argue that while social media may enrich democratic debate, it may propagate political polarization and prejudice. The mid-2024 invasion of Parliament of Kenya by protesters who mostly mobilized on social media demonstrates the power of social media to push for political accountability. While critics of social media use may project digital democracy as a double-edged that risks breaching peace as cited above, mobilization on social media for any political action is not in itself criminal, and violators of established laws need be sanctioned as such, without blanket condemnation of social media activism. While digital democracy mainly exercised through social media enhance political participation and reach, the partisan nature of this social media engagement may carry untold risks.

Digital democracy emerged as a multifaceted tool in promoting peace, playing diverse roles in the electoral process. One crucial aspect was the facilitation of transparent communication between candidates and voters. Indeed, research by Fung (2013) underscores the importance of transparent communication in mitigating potential conflicts and fostering trust in democratic processes. Additionally, digital democracy was acknowledged for encouraging constructive political discourse and debate, providing a platform to address voter concerns and grievances.

One of the significant contributions of digital democracy to peace promotion was the reduction of misinformation and propaganda. The study identified this role as pivotal in maintaining a peaceful electoral environment. Implementing content moderation and fact-checking mechanisms, providing guidelines for responsible

online communication, and encouraging user reporting of harmful content were key strategies employed during the 2022 presidential elections. These findings resonate with the research conducted by Tenove (2022), emphasizing the importance of combating disinformation for the stability of democratic processes.

2.2.3 Government Response to Digital Democracy in Kenya and Region

Despite fears that Kenya was going to shut down the internet during the 2022 general elections as had happened earlier in neighbouring countries, Kenya did not, demonstrating her relatively strong democratic credentials and strong political institutions, which allowed for peaceful transfer of presidential power to a victorious candidate that did not have the support of the government of the day (Cheeseman et al., 2024). While there were fears that the state could deploy its machinery to undermine or interfere with the presidential electoral result, the elections of William Ruto restored the confidence of the electorate in the electoral process, by demonstrating that a popular candidate can win, even against government's preferred candidate.

In Uganda's general elections of 2021, the government shut down social media and sections of the internet, with Uganda President accusing social media giant Facebook of "arrogance" (BBC News, 2021) never mind that the government itself was using the same platform for campaigns. The president of Uganda accused Facebook, a major social media platform, of being biased and conceited (Abrahamsen & Bareebe, 2021). Uganda seems to have picked some lessons on internet restriction from neighbouring Tanzania, who had restricted social media, especially WhatsApp and X space use during the elections of 2020 (Sakpa, 2020). Only few with Private Virtual Networks (PVN) could access and send information, with digital access freedom activists accusing Tanzania of weaponizing internet shutdowns (Access Now, 2023). In Central Africa, Chad had led the way by staging the longest social media censorship in Africa, a 16-months ban which lasted until July 2019 (Adebayo, 2019). The government had banned WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, and the ban was only lifted after a controversial amendment of the constitution that could have seen the late president Idriss Deby remain in power until 2033. In North Africa and Middle East, the Arab Spring of 2011 had demonstrated that digital democracy was on the rise, but Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 saw increased polarization and the move towards digital dictatorship (Gopaldas, 2022). Zimbabwe has also limited social media use, with social media activists often arrested and victimized by authorities (Mutsivairo, 2021). This align with the broader discourse on the negative impact of misinformation on the democratic process, as explored by Ayandokun and Nworu (2021), who emphasized the need for regulatory measures to curb its spread.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This article adopted a case study design, targeting adult University of Eldoret students as a case study. This allowed an in-depth interrogation of their experiences on digital democracy practices during August 2022 elections. Adopting a qualitative approach, case study research design allowed for triangulation and experiences (Paul & Kaurav, 2022) to be fully unpacked, without seeking to make any generalized findings. Case study research design allowed for the multi-faceted exploration of the complex practice of digital democracy in real life settings (Crowe et al, 2011)

3.2 Study Area

The study was based at University of Eldoret. Few officers serving in the criminal justice system and electoral management were also targeted as key informants, specifically on question three that sought to establish government response to digital democracy.

3.3 Target Population

It targeted 3100 third year and fourth year undergraduate students, most of whom had voted in the just concluded 2022 general election. It also purposely targeted government officers involved directly or indirectly in the electoral circle, to provide key information on their election experience.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

A questionnaire that attracted 311 respondents was administered online via google form. Key informant interview schedule, an email questionnaire, focus group discussion (FGD) and informal discussions were also used to collect data. FDGs asks participants about their attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, experiences, and practices that they have shared while interacting with various people (Van Eeuwijk & Angehrn, 2017). Two FGD's, each comprising eight (8) University of Eldoret students was conducted. The choice of students was based on the fact that they are the most active in social media, compared to other members of university community. FDG's allowed respondents to articulate themselves directly on the subject matter with room to get in-depth on any underlying reasons about the

subject. In depth interviews primarily targeted key informants who were deemed to have privileged or extensive knowledge on the issues under research (Hennink et al, 2011). Key informants interview schedule mostly targeting government officials was administered, with two (2)-online interviews having been conducted. Seven (7) other key informants responded to a questionnaire with open-ended questions on email, making our total responses from key informants nine (9). Written responses were most preferred by key informants of various state departments mentioned above, who were neither available for oral online nor face to face interviews. Most of the key informants were purposely targeted based on their role in the electoral process, and mostly accessed through personal and professional connections with the research team. While interview schedule questions and email questionnaire mainly targeted key informants like government officials at the Ministry of Interior, the Kenya Police, Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), it also targeted informants from online political party influencers based on the followers they command in their social media platforms.

3.5 Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Data was collected in August and September, 2023, exactly one year after the August 2022 general election. This timing was good, as respondents had a clear memory of their election experiences. To avoid a distorted picture (Cohen et al, 2005), data collection methods (FDGs, Key informants and questionnaire) were used inclusively. This methodological triangulation aimed at cross-checking, enhancing the credibility (Hesse-Biber, 2010) and verifying the data collected through the various methods. While quantitative data helped to describe responses, the qualitative aspects of the study sought to unpack the intentions of actors in digital democracy by appreciating the constructed nature of reality, and meanings which cannot be experimentally examined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

3.6 Data Analysis

Qualitative data was thematically categorized and thematically analysed and reported according to the research questions of the study. Quantitative data on the other hand was presented from the Google form table generators. Given the qualitative nature of the topic, the focus was on in-depth experiences on electoral process and the use of social media and digital devices, without neither having to make any generalization of findings nor establish correlations. Literature from academic articles, books, government reports, statutes, archival documents legislations etc also broadly and conceptually inform this study, allowing for comparability and contrasts of digital democracy in other contexts.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Navigating Challenges in Digital Democracy: Access, Disinformation and Fake News

Several respondents reported experiencing hitches while engaging with digital platforms for political involvement and participation during elections. The findings demonstrate that a significant proportion of participants, accounting for 60.1%, encountered varied challenges in their use of digital platforms for political engagement. This shows that a majority are not yet confident in using digital devices and platforms in political or democratic processes such as elections. 22.3% of the respondents considered themselves as digitally savvy and did not report experiencing any challenge using digital technologies while 17.5% were unsure about their ability to navigate the digital space. Among these challenges, disinformation and the spread of fake news emerged as a prominent concern for 27.8% of participants. Additionally, 15.2% of respondents reported that they feared that there was non-adherence to data privacy protection, illustrating the vulnerabilities of users, regulatory and institutional weaknesses in the use of digital platforms. While the Data Protection Act No.24 of 2019 provides relatively adequate legislative framework to manage data privacy and protection, many users are not sensitized of their rights in the Act, how to enforce them, or sanction individuals and institutions whenever there is a violation. While the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act of 2018 also provides a legal framework through which several cyber-crimes like publishing false and malicious information is sanctioned, including the use of computers to promote cyber terrorism, espionage, harassment and impersonation, there are fears that this could be used by the state to surveil and monitor citizens. Misuse of digital democracy in our article refers to engagements in the digital space that may be injurious to individuals and institutions, and which include but not limited to above cybercrimes sanctioned by the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act of 2018. It reveals concerns about the dissemination of slanderous information, cost and internet access challenges, tribal instigated hate messages, limitations on smartphone use, potential manipulation of election results, and challenges in the dissemination of electoral results. Each of these challenges point to the multifaceted nature of issues that can arise in the digital political landscape.

For instance, the concern about ethnic instigated hate messages aligns with research by Yarchi et al. (2020), exploring the impact of digital communication on political polarization. According to one respondent *“there were people who were inciting and sharing hate messages, but luckily people did not act on them, and peace prevailed”*.

Polarization could be a security threat especially in Kenya where identity politics is rife, and online hate messages could easily become a reality offline. Similarly, the limitation on smartphone use underscores the need for inclusive design considerations in digital democracy platforms, as discussed by Schwoerer, (2025), with the view of making them equitable. In addressing these challenges, the study provides valuable insights into potential areas for improvement in digital democracy platforms. It emphasizes the importance of regulatory frameworks, enhanced data privacy measures, and the need for inclusive and accessible design considerations to ensure a more equitable and effective digital democracy experience.

4.1.1 Securing Digital Democracy: Understanding and Addressing Privacy Concerns

Mavriki and Karyda(2019) have not only explored privacy concerns in the use of digital tools for ,campaigns and public policy, but have been more concerned with how big data has the potential to alter voter behaviour and consequently influence electoral outcomes. In my study, a significant proportion of respondents, comprising 52.6%, expressed concerns on the security and privacy of respondents' data on digital democracy platforms, emphasizing the need for robust measures to build trust in the digital electoral process and infrastructure. While many applications will often seek user consent for data mining, the user is often not fully aware of the pros and cons of such consent. This concern, documented by the study, aligns with broader discussions on the vulnerabilities and potential risks associated with the digitalization of political processes (Hong & Kim, 2016). Contrarily, 32.9% of respondents held a more optimistic opinion, indicating a certain level of confidence in the existing security measures of digital democracy platforms. Respondents contributed valuable insights into potential solutions to address the identified concerns, offering a glimpse into contemporary discussions on data privacy and security in digital spaces. Recommendations such as enhancing citizen education, a robust government regulation, enhanced security measures, censorship of illegal or non-compliant platforms, awareness campaigns, verification and vetting measures, government investment in cybersecurity infrastructure, and the implementation of existing laws were proposed by different respondents. Each of these proposals aligns with existing research and discussions in the field of digital governance and cybersecurity, which seeks to maximize benefits of digital spaces while limiting their negative implications. For instance, the emphasis on citizen education (21.3%) echoes the work of Sharma et al. (2022), who highlight the pivotal role of digital literacy in empowering citizens to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape. Similarly, the call for government regulation (19.8%) aligns with broader discussions by Marsden et al. (2022) on the need for regulatory frameworks to ensure responsible digital practices in the political domains, such as elections.

The study emphasizes the multifaceted nature of concerns related to the security and privacy of respondents' data on digital democracy platforms. The proposed solutions underscore the need for a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving education, regulation, technology enhancements, and legal frameworks to ensure a secure and trustworthy digital electoral process.

Table 1

Concerns Regarding Security and Privacy of Participants' Data while Engaging with Digital Democracy Platforms

Feedback	N	Percentage
Yes	164	52.7%
No	102	32.8%
Not sure	45	14.5%

4.2 Digital Democracy and the Future of Citizen Participation: A Comprehensive Perspective

By examining respondents' perceptions on the transformative potential of digital democracy in reshaping citizen participation in future elections using digital platforms for political engagement,the findings reveal an overwhelming consensus, with about 94% of respondents expressing a firm belief in the transformative capacity of digital democracy (Table 2). This optimistic outlook aligns with research by Fischli and Muldoon (2024), which underscores the power of digital democracy in enhancing civic engagement and expanding participation. It emphasizes the emergence of digital democracy as a formidable force in shaping the future of citizen participation, where online participation is expected to intensify. Majority of the participants in the FGD agreed that WhatsApp communication enabled them to know the presidential aspirants and later candidates, and helped them familiarize with Kenya Kwanza and Azimio manifestos, the two dominant political outfits at the time. Several participants reportedly turned out and voted in 2022 general elections due to the information and updates made by social media platforms such as X, WhatsApp and Facebook, an indication that social media could impact on voter turnout and voter behaviour

Fischli and Muldoon (2024) assertion that digital democracy emerges as a powerful force in shaping the future of citizen participation, offering new avenues for civic engagement and political involvement, captures the essence of the transformative impact highlighted by the respondents in this study. This perspective signifies a broader acknowledgment of the potential of digital platforms to redefine political engagement dynamics. However, the study

also acknowledges a minority perspective, represented by 2.8% of respondents, which holds the view that digital democracy has no significant effect on citizen participation. This view, though by minority demonstrates the importance of addressing barriers, digital divides, and concerns about the efficacy of digital platforms to ensure the inclusivity of digital democracy initiatives. Scholars such as Hussain and Phulpoto (2024) have argued that to harness the full potential of digital participation, ongoing efforts are required to enhance digital literacy and promote equitable access to technology.

This study demonstrates the promising future of citizen participation in elections through the lens of digital democracy. The overwhelmingly positive outlook suggests a collective recognition by respondents, most of whom were youths of the transformative potential of digital platforms in reshaping political engagement dynamics. However, the study also underscores the importance of considering and addressing the concerns of the minority who perceive limited significance in digital democracy, especially in changing voter behaviour and electoral outcomes.

Table 2

Role of Digital Democracy in Transforming Citizen Participation in Future Elections

Feedback	N	Percentage
Yes	292	93.9%
No	8	2.6%
Not sure	11	3.54%

4.2.1 Role of Digital Democracy in Promoting Peace

The study revealed a nuanced perspective among respondents regarding the role of digital democracy in promoting peace during the 2022 Kenyan presidential election. Out of the 311 participants, 40.5% affirmed that digital democracy had a significant influence on fostering peace, attributing it to various factors, such as the sharing of flyers and peaceful messages in WhatsApp, Facebook and X. Interestingly, a slightly higher percentage, 46.1%, believed that while digital democracy played a role in promoting peace, its impact was only marginal and peripheral. A notable 11.6% expressed the view that digital democracy had a very limited effect in promoting peace during the presidential election. Those who held this rather pessimistic view in the FGD also stated that digital democracy especially via social media was unable to address or mitigate issues related to hate speech, misinformation, or incitement to violence during the election period. Others pointed out the biased nature of social media messaging that seemed to support and advocate more for then Azimio coalition as compared to Kenya Kwanza coalition. This supposed biasness could however not be authoritatively be confirmed, and may be attributed to subjective biases of the respondents.

Table 3

Role of Digital Democracy in Promoting Peace

Feedback	N	Percentage
To a greater extent	126	40.5 %
To some extent	143	46.1%
To a limited extent	36	11.6%
Not at all	6	1.8%

During the 2022 presidential elections, digital democracy also played a crucial role in addressing hate speech and incitement to violence. The implementation of content moderation, fact-checking mechanisms, and collaboration with law enforcement agencies were identified as effective measures. This aligns with recommendations from Nganguli (2024), who advocate for collaborative efforts between digital platforms and law enforcement to mitigate the spread of harmful content.

In terms of tools and platforms, respondents identified X, WhatsApp, and Facebook as the most effective in promoting peace. The appreciation extended to mobile telephone providers, particularly Safaricom, and media houses (through their websites) for the frequent dissemination of peace messages prior to the 2022 presidential elections. These findings underscore the significance of a comprehensive approach involving both digital platforms and traditional media in promoting peace during electoral processes.

4.2.2 The Abuse of Digital Democracy: Hate Speech, Incitement to Violence and Threats to Peace

Regarding the perception of respondents on the misuse of digital democracy tools during the 2022 Kenyan presidential election, a substantial 44.3% of participants expressed concern that social media were misused to spread hate speech, incite violence, and disrupt peace. This finding underscores the potential dark side of digital democracy, revealing its susceptibility to being exploited for harmful purposes. Digital literacy on how to crosscheck and verify

information, and how digital spaces can be used as spaces to promote peace may go a long way in limiting digital contents threatening peace.

Conversely, 32.6% of respondents held a contrasting view, asserting that digital democracy did not promote hate speech or violence. This divergence in opinion suggests a varied understanding and appreciation of digital platforms among participants regarding the role and impact of digital democracy in influencing public discourse during elections. The uncertainty surrounding the misuse of digital democracy was notable, with 23.1% of respondents stating that they were not sure whether social media was misused, through promoting hate speech, disinformation or other means that may disrupt peace. This uncertainty might be attributed to the complex and evolving nature of social media digital platforms, making it challenging for users to discern instances of misuse or manipulation, and whether such manipulation actually resulted in the breach of peace. While it may be difficult to establish causality, the fact that thousands of supporters were mobilized online in the Capitol Hill breach in Washington DC ((Jeppesen et al, 2022) and in the June 2024 invasion of parliament in Nairobi demonstrates that one cannot underestimate the power of social media in contributing towards what others have described as threat to national security (Saaka & Saaka, 2026).

Cases of misuse of digital social media platforms highlighted by respondents included the spread of hate speech and incitement, as well as the peddling of falsehoods and manipulation of relayed election results. These instances align with broader concerns raised in academic research about the potential for digital platforms to be weaponized for disinformation and manipulation during electoral processes. To further explore this phenomenon, future research could delve into the specific mechanisms and tactics employed in the misuse of digital democracy tools. Additionally, understanding the factors contributing to users' perceptions of misuse and the effectiveness of existing measures in preventing such misuse would provide valuable insights for policymakers and platform developers.

Majority of the respondents observed several challenges/limitations with digital democracy initiatives concerning peace during the 2022 Kenyan Presidential General Election, with some reporting that some electorate threatened others with statements on social media regarding the party that would win, and potential negative consequences should particular candidates not win. According to Omwoha (2022), while voting exercise took place unhindered, the digital aspects of transmission of the results failed; attracting condemnation from various stakeholders who dismissed the election results on the basis that they were opaque and unverifiable. She argues that while voting exercise was smooth, the malpractice had been successfully executed during campaigns by Cambridge Analytica, but without detection by the opposition and civil society. Based on this assertion, Omwoha (2022) has indeed argued that digital technologies did not offer opportunities but threats to democracy as well (Omwoha, 2022). This notwithstanding, she admits that digital technologies if harnessed could provide a platform through which discourses that promote peacebuilding could be canvassed.

Table 4

Misuse of Digital Democracy

Feedback	N	Percentage
Yes	138	44.3 %
No	101	32.6%
Not sure	72	23.1%

Implications of Electoral Technology in Kenya have clearly indicated lack of proper use of modern technology and a weak electoral system that has potential to trigger electoral political chaos. For instance, the digitisation of the 2013 General Election came with some challenges. The secure servers intended for results transmission were unable to handle the volume of data being uploaded, leading to a breakdown (Omwoha, 2022). Same applied in 2022 general elections where the Azimio coalition demanded the opening of the servers while questioning transparency in tallying of votes in Kenya's 2022 presidential elections. The perception of misuse of digital technologies during elections is therefore not just limited to the electorate and individuals but extends to electoral management and managers.

4.3 Government of Kenya Response on Digital Democracy Mis(use) and Insights from Region

Despite pressure of the 2022 general elections, and the disinformation and hate messages spread especially in social media, the GoK committed not to shut down the internet and kept all social media platforms available. There was fear that GoK could limit internet and social media access, as had happened in neighbouring Uganda and Tanzania in 2021 and 2020 respectively. Despite the pressure, which included misinformation and disinformation in social media, the GoK maintained access to internet and social media platforms. According to one government official in the Ministry of Interior who requested anonymity, *"there was pressure shortly after elections from politicians who argued that a candidate of the government cannot lose while we(government) did nothing, but many even in the*

security sector felt that interfering with elections in favour of a particular presidential candidate would risk destabilizing the country”.

Majority of the participants stated to have been misinformed on political issues, like displaying of fake news on winning candidates of different parties by supposedly different television stations e.g. on KBC and Citizen. Data falsification issues were reported, where different voter turn-out, varied votes and fake polling stations emerged causing confusion among voters. While GoK continue to face challenges on containing misuse of social media especially during elections, it has continued to promote media freedom, unlike several other neighbouring countries in Africa which have had to either shut down the internet during elections or limit use of social media platforms. This portrays Kenya as having a relatively strong democratic credentials compared to its peers in East Africa.

Internet shutdown is a clear indication of the dilemma of governments in maintaining media freedom, without losing control of information channels and messaging that would mostly favour incumbent regimes, that are mostly dictatorial. Unregulated social media messages on sensitive electoral matters have also spread fear, hatred and risk instigating electoral violence, with tech giants often only keen on making profits, while slow to regulate and sanction users abusing their social media platforms. Although the GoK did not shut down the internet during its 2022 elections, the robust use of social media during campaigns demonstrates the prospects and problems of digital democracy, that needs to be studied further, and lessons drawn to inform theory and policy.

4.4 Assessing the Effectiveness of Digital Democracy compared to Traditional Approaches in Promoting Electoral Peace

The study aimed to gauge the effectiveness of digital democracy compared to traditional methods of election campaigning and information dissemination in promoting peace. A significant 76.9% of respondents expressed the view that digital democracy initiatives were more effective in fostering peace than traditional methods. This suggests a prevailing belief among participants in the potential of digital platforms to contribute positively to peace-building efforts during elections. However, 12.1% held a contrary opinion, indicating a diversity of perspectives on the relative effectiveness of digital democracy. The pessimism around potential of digital democracy in promoting peace could be attributed to disinformation, fake news and other cybercrimes that undermine peacebuilding, and the digital divide that relegates voices of those who cannot access digital democracy to the margins.

The uncertainty surrounding the effectiveness of digital democracy was notable, with 11% of respondents being unsure of whether digital democracy could actually be helpful in peacebuilding. This uncertainty could be attributed to the limited experience of these respondents, particularly those participating in their first election as voters during the 2022 presidential election. Their lack of exposure to scenarios devoid of digital democracy platforms might have influenced their uncertainty.

Analysing the strengths of digital democracy and drawing from the personal experiences of respondents during the 2022 presidential elections, a substantial 87.4% believed that digital democracy could be a valuable tool for promoting peace in future Kenyan elections. This notable increase from the percentage favouring digital democracy's effectiveness in the current election (76.9%) to future elections (87.4%) underscores a growing confidence in the potential of digital platforms as effective instruments for peace promotion. Messages promoting peace in social media platforms was more likely to spread faster and reach a wider audience. Civic education on the need for tolerance and peaceful electoral processes could also be effectively disseminated in social media spaces.

Despite the recognition of digital democracy's efficacy, respondents highlighted areas for improvement to enhance its effectiveness in future elections. Recommendations included the need for enhanced mass education, particularly targeting the youth, on the proper use of digital democracy platforms. Empowering community elders to navigate digital tools and improving internet connectivity across the country were also identified as crucial steps. Additionally, ensuring access to affordable smartphones emerged as a key factor in optimizing the potential of digital democracy.

Table 5

Whether digital democracy is the most effective method compared with traditional methods of election campaigning and information dissemination in promoting peace

Feedback	Percentage
Yes	76.9 %
No	12.1%
Not sure	11 %

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This article demonstrates that while digital democracy enhanced participation during Kenya's 2022 elections, disinformation and hate speech continue to polarize the electorate and has the potential to breach peace or cause political instability and insecurity. While there exists a legal framework that seek to tame data and cyber security violators, the massive number of perpetrators and the progressive constitution that guarantees freedom of speech and expression makes it increasingly difficult for GoK to adequately regulate the digital social media space. The social media also plays a key role in peacebuilding, and if well harnessed could help consolidate peace. Acknowledging the thin line between misuse of social media and the freedom of speech envisaged in Kenya's constitution, it calls on various actors and regulator to act responsibly to ensure the potential of digital democracy in harnessed without threatening the peace and security of the state.

Although digital democracy enhanced participation, it does not necessarily enrich debate, and is not designed to promote deliberate cognition for independent decision making. This implies that while digital democracy tends to improve information dissemination pace and quantity, it does not necessarily enhance its quality. The polarizing nature of digital democracy is therefore by technological design, which is created to attract attention for increased viewership or readership. As a remedy, digital democracy should be accompanied by robust civic education, so as to empower the electorate to make more informed political choices.

5.2 Recommendations

Firstly, there is need for IEBC and other stakeholders to conduct and encourage civic education on the limitations of digital democracy, and the need to verify information before circulation, so as to avoid polarizing populations through fake news and disinformation, especially during charged political contests like elections. While digital democracy has enhanced citizen participation, this participation may not always be deliberative and informative, as it tends to polarize and radicalize participants, hence the need to sensitize the electorate on its risks.

Secondly, while digitizing the electoral management process is commendable, there is need for safeguards, to ensure the elections remain transparent and verifiable, and that no external forces interfere with the process. Kenya and African countries should therefore be careful with blind and rushed digitization of the electoral processes, and not see it as panacea for dwindling public trust on electoral institutions, especially where independent electoral management is not envisaged.

Declaration of Interest

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