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## Mass mediatisation of social media: The case of Uganda's 2016 presidential elections as covered by NTV on Facebook

### ABSTRACT

Based on the 2016 presidential election in Uganda as covered on the NTV Facebook page, this paper, emanating from a doctoral study, shows how the medium of television has mass mediatised Facebook. The onset of social media has meant that audiences increasingly turn to such platforms for their information needs, including news. As a consequence, the traditional media's role of providing such news and information updates is demoted and threatened. In order to stay relevant, mass media has had to join social media platforms to provide the aforementioned information/news. In attempting to do so, mass media has consequently mediatised social media, especially as seen through the lens of the agenda-setting theory, which this paper argues is in contrast with the discursive nature of social media as a public sphere.

### INTRODUCTION

Uganda's 2016 presidential election was widely covered by the media through both the traditional channels and social media platforms managed by the media houses in the country. On the same social media platforms was a plethora of voices from ordinary citizens (followers), converged online to debate the elections as informed both by what featured in the news as well as their own first-hand accounts. In the build-up to the elections conducted on 18 and 19 February 2016, therefore, the country witnessed an unprecedented increase in use of social media by ordinary citizens, politicians and the media (Rugambwa & Messerschmidt, 2015: 2). It should be noted that whereas the elections in Uganda are called presidential and parliamentary elections, this paper focuses only on the presidential aspect of the elections.

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One of the media houses that was active in the period of the elections was NTV (Nation Television Uganda). NTV is one of the top television stations in Uganda in terms of viewership (Ipsos Connect, 2017). It is a traditional television station that runs active news bulletins during the day and in the evening. With the advent of social media, however, the television station has moved online too and maintains vibrant social media platforms with regular news updates. One of these platforms that is relevant to this paper is Facebook. This paper seeks to investigate how NTV used Facebook in this period, since the platform was also actively used by ordinary citizens and politicians. The research question to be answered is: How did Nation Television use Facebook in engaging followers on the political discourse in Uganda during the 2016 presidential elections?

The paper argues that by NTV joining this public sphere of Facebook, it sought to use it as a mass media channel. This is what the paper terms as mass mediatisation of social media. The further argument is that the mass mediatisation of social media is in conflict with the discursive nature of these platforms as a public sphere.

## **1. TRADITIONAL MEDIA JOINS SOCIAL MEDIA: THE LITERATURE**

This paper's investigation of NTV's use of Facebook makes it necessary to understand the body of literature on the amalgamation of traditional and social media. In addition, there is the need to understand how Facebook has been used in other countries during elections.

Whereas television has always had large audiences, the onset of social media has made it necessary for television to adopt these new technologies (Cushion, 2012). Television journalism has integrated the salient features of the internet and consequently become a more integrated online service through interactive websites or social media platforms such as Facebook. Dwyer (2010) notes that traditional media have had to expand into online platforms owing to a decline in advertising revenues. Rodny-Gumede (2017: 281) observes that journalists have been compelled to produce news at a fast rate, similar to how fast information circulates on social media. She nonetheless cautions that social media and social networks have not replaced traditional media and should therefore be seen as complementary (Rodny-Gumede, 2017: 273, 277).

Whereas the scholarly community remains divided on the actual impact that social media has had or continues to have on traditional media, Rodny-Gumede (2017) insists that mainstream media has to adapt to new technologies or risk extinction. This paper argues that in this co-existence or adaptation of traditional media to social media, it is important that traditional media remains cognisant of how social media operates as a free platform.

### **1.1 Use of Facebook in presidential elections**

The use of Facebook in presidential elections of other countries draws important correlations with how these platforms were used in Uganda's 2016 elections. The 2008 internet and social media campaign by President Barack Obama in the United States of America is said to have elevated social media and put it in the spotlight as a key campaign tool, as noted by Samuel-

Azran, Yarchi and Wolfsfeld (2015: 3). The activities and conversation on these platforms were in this respect symbolic of a global trend.

In a study to analyse the 2013 Israeli elections, Samuel-Azran *et al.* (2013: 4) focused on how citizens engaged with the Facebook posts of the five leading candidates, and concluded that Facebook 'shares' demonstrated a higher level of engagement as opposed to 'likes.' A similar study was conducted by Schwartz (2015:1), who used a qualitative content analysis to investigate the comments on the Facebook pages of the eight top contenders in the 2011 Danish elections. This study concluded that the Facebook pages of politicians were critical in connecting citizens to politicians for feedback.

In analysing the role of social media during the post-election crisis in 2008 in Kenya, Makinen and Kuira (2008: 329, 331) argue that citizens used social media as a way of getting involved. They further argue that citizens, dissatisfied with the limited possibilities in traditional media, opted for social media as an alternative public sphere to give their account of events.

Uganda's presidential candidates, too, ran their campaigns on social media alongside other fora. Presidential candidate and former Prime Minister, John Patrick Amama Mbabazi, took the lead when he posted a YouTube video of his presidential bid (Rugambwa & Messerschmidt, 2015). A report by the African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME, 2016: 74) puts emphasis on the use of Twitter by the presidential candidates and observed that the incumbent, Yoweri Museveni, sent out the highest number of tweets, totalling 433, followed by Amama Mbabazi with 353 and Dr Kizza Besigye at 175. The citizens of Uganda extensively used social media to debate issues and mobilise opposition to the government in the period of the elections. This included comparing pictures taken 30 years ago to the current situation in the country to emphasise the need for change in the presidency (Gumede, 2016: 415).

### **1.2 The case of Facebook and the public sphere theory**

This paper aligns with the notion of the public sphere and the agenda-setting theory. In the theory of the public sphere, Habermas (1989: 34) talks of a public sphere of salons and coffee houses where people congregated and deliberated on critical issues. Such debate was inspired by works of literature, art, economic and political disputes of the day. Habermas notes that both in the coffee houses and salons, discussions were held among ordinary individuals, and that in these public spaces someone's status was not important. This was because the ground for debate was levelled, with people congregating as equals. In addition, the discussions allowed for the problematisation of areas that had initially not been questioned. This public sphere later disintegrated because of state interference (Holub, 1991:6).

But the increased participation, interaction and convergence on social media has seen Lim (2009: 69) interpret the entire internet experience as a new form of the public sphere. Social media have gradually come to impact on the way people experience online media and, according to Hinton and Hjorth (2013:2), it has since become an integral part of daily life. It has come with the opportunity for new avenues of dissemination and engagement.

It is this increased engagement on social media and the continued proliferation of the internet in Uganda that citizens maximised in using Facebook as a public sphere. A 2016 report by the African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME, 2016: 27–28), which monitored the media coverage of the 2016 elections, calculates the number of internet users in Uganda to be about 13 million. Ugandans use the internet for several reasons, including engaging on social media platforms such as Facebook. Kanyoro (2015) observes that Ugandans use social media to practice citizen journalism and this consequently lessens the need for updates from mainstream media.

### **1.3 The agenda-setting theory**

Whereas as seen above, Ugandans seem to be relying on Facebook and other social media for information updates (Kanyoro, 2015), the mainstream media has continued to operate in a manner that maintains it as an authority of information, as will be expounded on later. The paper therefore draws on the tenets of the agenda-setting theory to better place how NTV operated in the period of the elections.

The events that citizens read or watch in the news come from the structured processes of media houses. As noted by Maxwell McCombs (2014: 1), citizens deal with a second-hand reality structured by journalists' reports about events and situations. This ability of the news media to first of all identify key issues and secondly to influence the salience of these issues on the public agenda is what McCombs and Shaw termed agenda setting. To establish the validity of this agenda-setting claim, McCombs and Shaw (1972: 177–178) investigated what the key issues of concern were for voters in the 1968 presidential elections in the USA. The investigation was limited to voters at Chapel Hill. The issues raised by these voters were compared to the issues in the news media consumed by the same voters. It was discovered that the five issues of foreign policy, law and order, economics, public welfare and civil rights that dominated the media agenda had a correspondence to those raised by the Chapel Hill voters (McCombs, 2014: 4–6).

With the advent of the internet and subsequently social media platforms such as Facebook, the agenda-setting role has come into question, especially since traditional media have joined these platforms. As noted by Fortunato and Martin (2016: 130), an analysis of the construction of public agendas in contemporary times ought to consider individuals' and organisations' use of social media.

For the special case of elections, Owen (2017: 823) observes that reporting on campaigns is not exclusive to professional journalists, since bloggers and average citizens cover events and provide commentary that is widely available. The vast internet communication options, including websites, emails, chatrooms and of course social media, have changed the communication behaviours of people and allowed for a multiplicity of agendas to surface (McCombs, 2005: 544). Feezell (2018: 482) agrees that social media are capable of causing an agenda-setting effect through the exposure to and subsequent sharing of political news.

The ability to use social media and other online platforms by different people and organisations has seen McCombs (2005: 544–545) point towards a possible demise of the agenda-setting function as traditionally known. This fear of demise is premised on the continued fragmentation of audiences, as they pick information from diverse online sources. Natalia Aruguete (2017: 36, 42) agrees with McCombs (2005) on the possible demise of traditional agenda setting and calls for recognition of audiences as active users, empowered and capable of forming their own perceptions not necessarily permeated by the press.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The study applies a combination of in-depth interviews and netnography to bring into empirical scrutiny the ways in which citizens and other followers on the NTV Facebook page engaged news on the political discourse in Uganda during the 2016 presidential elections.

### **2.1 Netnography**

The study used netnography in investigating Facebook use. Netnography can be understood as an online version of ethnography that attaches itself to the same qualitative research approach and various research techniques as with ethnographic studies. In other words, netnography applies qualitative research techniques in an online context. Its foci are the reflections and data on human communication – textual or multimedia such as video, audio, pictures – provided by online communities. There is general consensus that ethnography uses observation as the main data-gathering technique although interviews can also be used (Creswell, 2007; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

For the research question, data was collected both through observation of the online conversations as well as by interviewing NTV Uganda officials. The study period was two months, January to February 2016. This enabled an analysis of the Facebook conversations posted prior, during, and shortly after the 2016 presidential elections which, as earlier mentioned, took place on 18 and 19 February 2016.

As an online version of ethnography, netnography is commended for being non-intrusive because it uses mainly observational data. Netnographic observation is thus more naturalistic than other qualitative techniques such as interviews and focus groups. Netnography allows researchers to download data from an online community even long after the social interaction. As such, interactive media pages present with large volumes of data, commonly known as 'big data' (Skalski, Neuendorf and Cajigas, 2017: 202–204). For example, the observation reported in this paper takes place in 2020, four years after the conversations happened on Facebook. What this means is not only that the observation was on what Wilson and colleagues (2012) call 'traces' of observable behaviour, but also that the researcher observed but did not participate in the interactions as ethnographers do. Accordingly, some key elements of ethnographic research, such as self-reflexivity in which the involvement of the researcher in the society and culture of those being studied is particularly close, were not required.

## **2.2 Sampling the Facebook data**

The heterogeneous, fast-changing space of online participants on the NTV Facebook page means it is difficult to achieve a sample in the statistical sense. Also the enormity of followers on the NTV Uganda Facebook page made it impossible to observe all the interactions. For example, a total of 1,300 comments were posted for the first week of January 2016 alone. Given the enormity of the data, Facebook posts included in the study were purposively selected. According to Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003:78) purposive selection implies that the chosen sample has desirable characteristics to allow for detailed research exploration. This sampling strategy recognises researcher judgement in identifying comments that would best answer the research question on how NTV used Facebook in engaging followers on the political discourse in Uganda during the 2016 presidential elections.

In analysing the NTV Facebook page, specific content emanating from news stories that were related to the 2016 elections only was desired.

Still, faced with the challenge of big data on social media's interactive pages as highlighted above, the researcher decided to focus on the months of January and February 2016 only. To get to a more realistic sample size within these two months, for the month of January, only stories that attracted the highest responses in the first week of the month were considered. The week span was from Friday 1 to Thursday 7 January 2016.

To further arrive at a manageable sample, only stories that attracted at least 100 comments were considered for analysis. If a day had more than one posted story, the selected story would be the one that had the highest comments of them all, even if others transcend the 100 comments threshold. The researcher was convinced that the issues under discussion in such stories would present a good basis for analysing how NTV used Facebook in engaging its Facebook followers at the peak of the elections. NTV Uganda published a total of 14 stories related to the presidential elections in this first week of January 2016. Following the above criteria and to further narrow the sample, a total of the top 4 stories out of the 14 published in this period were identified as relevant.

Furthermore, for each of the four selected stories, only the first 30 comments were considered. Therefore, a total of 120 comments were analysed for the month of January. The considered comments from followers had to be written mainly in English and in non-abusive language. In instances where a comment had one or two negligible words in any of the local languages, the comment was considered. Negligible was in this case interpreted by the researcher to mean that these few words did not affect the overall message of engagement conveyed by the person posting.

A criterion similar to the one used in January was used for selection of stories and comments for inclusion during the month of February. The only variation was that the researcher considered the election week of this month. This week was from Sunday 14 to Saturday 20

February 2016. Since this research is about the 2016 elections, the researcher considered this week as the most appropriate in analysing Facebook conversations. In addition, this week enabled the researcher to analyse the comments during elections which took place on 18 and 19 February 2016, and shortly after the elections. For this week, a total of 39 stories were published on the NTV Facebook platform. The selection of stories that attracted at least 100 comments availed a total of 16 stories for consideration. Out of these, the top 4 stories with the highest number of comments were selected.

Therefore a combination of January and February 2016 availed a total of eight stories and 240 comments for analysis. Table 1 below shows the inclusion criteria: the day and week of publication (shaded) and the number of comments represented by the number in the shaded box. In bold are the final stories selected for analysis. In brown ink are the election days.

**Table 1: Selection of stories for January and February 2016**

Jan	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
Week1					132	61 86	17 23 142
Week2		100 174 38 40	183 212	33 59			
Week3							
Week4							
Feb	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
Week1							
Week2							299
Week3	131 170	40 119	15 50 35 28 19 58 05 11 93	29 44 113 149 04 05 45 422 29 50 07 18	84 18 260 110 85 28	161 339 179 539 251 290 151	
Week4							

### ***2.3 In-depth interviews***

This study used interviews to gather further data in addition to netnography explained above. In-depth interviews are necessary especially in incidences where the subject of investigation cannot be directly observed. This may include events that are in the past. Interviews are also important in getting people to talk about the meanings they attach to what happens around them, and by interviewing these people a researcher gets the opportunity to appreciate their perspective (Patton, 2002: 341). In discussing the advantages of in-depth interviews, Wimmer and Dominick (2003: 127) explain that interviews allow for lengthy observations of non-verbal responses, and are also suitable for small sample sizes. This makes it possible to structure the interview questions in a manner that allows each respondent to answer different questions. For this paper, journalists, editors and online content managers at NTV were interviewed for their views on use of the Facebook platform.

### ***2.4 Sampling of interview respondents***

The researcher used a census method to include an entire population of respondents (Sigdel, 2011). This decision was informed by the fact that newsrooms are usually comprised of a considerably small number of staff. Those selected were directly involved in the 2016 presidential elections in Uganda. A total of 11 respondents were interviewed. Of these, four were editors of the news bulletins at NTV, three were online content managers and four were journalists.

## ***3. HOW NATION TELEVISION USED FACEBOOK IN ENGAGING FOLLOWERS ON THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN UGANDA***

This section presents the results of the research question on NTV's use of Facebook. One of them is that NTV uses Facebook as a news space. Secondly, the station uses Facebook as a platform to set the agenda for national discourse. But as per the 2016 elections, the response to content from NTV was so overwhelming that the station had difficulty in coping with the volume of engagement. The paper further shows that there is a conflict of agendas and discourse among NTV and other entities present online. Finally, the paper shows that NTV uses Facebook as an advertising platform. Each of these findings is explained in detail below.

### ***3.1 Facebook as a news space***

The research findings indicate that NTV used Facebook as a platform for the dissemination of news updates on the 2016 elections. Aware of the power of social media and with the intention of using Facebook to extend the television station's influence and power, NTV made deliberate efforts to maintain a consistent flow of information online. This, as explained by one of the news editors and in relation to the 2016 elections, involved ensuring that all NTV staff had smart phones ahead of the elections.

A smart phone loan scheme was introduced. The idea was that every single person in the company would be able to update their social media platforms, and re-share as much content from NTV across their own platform. This was for all staff and we would use it as a tool for newsgathering and news sharing. And probably one of the reasons as to why NTV had both the fastest growing Facebook page and the most followers on Twitter is because we kind of had a presence almost everywhere (Respondent B, 17 April 2018).

This scheme allowed employees to pay up for the phones to the tune of three million Uganda shillings over a 12-month period. Specifically, for the journalists, the television station required of them to file stories on the go while in the field. These stories were then uploaded on Facebook as first priority, before the same were shared on air.

The study interprets NTV's use of Facebook as a news space to be a demonstration of a quest for overall control of the conversation on Facebook over the other users of the platform, such as ordinary citizens (followers) and the state. It was intentional that news discourse populates the platform. It is less surprising therefore that in addition to both the smart phone scheme mentioned above and the requirement for instant updates from journalists, NTV further ensured that Facebook and other social media platforms were fully attended to. As explained by an editor at the station, dedicated staff were employed to handle these platforms.

So previously we had just about two people running the social media platforms. I will take you back to about early 2015. So, we had one social media executive and one online editor. In the run-up to elections, we had to recruit another social media executive but also put together the digital department (Respondent B, 17 April 2018).

In this process of constantly sharing information and updates, NTV used the Facebook platform to both gather and share the latest news updates and/or break the news. As noted by Rodny-Gumede (2017: 281), journalists are now compelled to produce news at a rate similar to how fast information circulates on social media. This further implies that journalists and media personnel are now required to possess multimedia expertise and integrate social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009; Dwyer, 2010; Cushion, 2012).

### ***3.2 Facebook as a platform for agenda setting***

In coding the activity of the NTV Facebook page, the researcher established that the television station did not respond to its followers regarding the stories posted. As seen in a section of the coding process shown in Table 2 below, the column on 'response from NTV' remained blank.

**Table 2: A section of the analysis of engagement on the NTV Facebook page, 2016**

Story title and date posted by NTV	Comments from followers	Response from NTV
January 1, 2016	Mbabazi should know that more is still to come and he will soon understand the true meaning of being a member of opposition in Uganda. When he was enjoying the comfort of his long time friend, Dr. Besigye was sprayed, his finger was shot.	Nil
Mbabazi expresses concerns over being shadowed by unknown men.		
132 Comments		
	Great view	
	And Mbabazi never condemned the above, he even geared the formulation of POMA to suffocate opposition rallies; now it's his turn to feel it.	Nil

Traditional media is known to disseminate information and set the agenda for public discourse. In this role, traditional media positions itself as an authority on events and public happenings. By extension, this role carries with it an embedded implication of non-reciprocity between traditional media and its audiences. This is in as far as switching such positions is concerned. This means that the audience is mainly considered as recipients of that which is constructed or interpreted by the media, and not *vice versa*. This is not to say that traditional media does not allow for feedback. It certainly does, but in a sense that accommodates reaction to what has been presented by traditional media itself in most cases. Social media, on the other hand, is inherently interactive and avails opportunities for media houses to engage with audiences, whereas this engagement is absent on the NTV Facebook page. The non-responsiveness on the side of NTV is interpreted to imply that the television has carried its traditional agenda-setting role into the public sphere of Facebook, to disseminate information in a one-way process. In this process, the television station continues to populate the Facebook page with content; followers of the page engage with this content and sometimes ask questions, yet no response from NTV is registered.

What usually happens is, if let's say we post something in error, then we would immediately correct, delete and then offer correction. However, usually the weakness comes in if somebody asks for clarification. So sometimes we would leave it up to the person running the social media desk to make judgment or to say, you guys, there is this thing I think we need to respond to. If they do raise that issue then we say, okay you respond in this way (Respondent A, 14 April 2018).

From the above submissions, television is arguably seen not only to set the agenda but also to attempt to exercise power over national discourse by availing topics for discussion and not engaging followers on these topics. The television station is yet to fully accommodate

the possibility of sharing this assumed power over availing both the topics for discussion and engaging citizens online over the same. The station seems to be comfortable generating content, putting it out and only coming in to rectify errors, but not to engage the netizens. As noted by Aruguete (2017: 36, 42), new media platforms threaten traditional media's ability to steer the public agenda. This is so because these platforms allow for unrestricted alternative sources of information. The above testimonies by the editors confirm that television has joined the online public sphere of Facebook to use it as a space to set the agenda for national discourse and further entrench its power as an authority on discourse. Consequently, television is not coming into this space as an equal participant, as is synonymous with the notion of the public sphere where participants converge as equals. Instead, television comes in as a 'superior' to dictate the discursive agenda — similar to the offline model.

### **3.3 Overwhelming response and the inability to cope**

Although the television station employed additional staff to handle the social media platforms, it can be argued that NTV underestimated the volume of responses that come from social media. The respondents in charge of managing these platforms explained that the staffing levels were still insufficient. This insufficiency meant that timely response to many of the concerns raised by followers of the page could not be effected. In the interviews, the online content managers confirmed that indeed the volume of activity was beyond measure, but that they sometimes answered queries sent through the inbox and not on the public page:

The audiences we have online keep sending messages and asking questions. We follow the comments, the challenge is that at times they are way too many comments. You put up a post and suddenly you have about 500 comments and you have just a window of say 10 minutes just to engage with that particular audience (Respondent R, 19 April 2018).

We discussed it and thought for purposes of making this whole thing as interactive and as participatory as possible, we would let it go unmoderated and hope that people stick to the issues and thankfully for the most part, they did. And having somebody to read through everything would require a full-time job which we did not have man power for at that time (Respondent F, 24 April 2018).

To the researcher, this insufficiency is further evidence that less priority was given to ample staffing, since agenda setting was preferred. The recruitment of additional staff to handle the online platforms only served in ensuring that these platforms were constantly populated with news updates. Shortage of competent staff during elections is one of the known dilemmas for the media, especially since audiences expect the media to be ubiquitous (Frère, 2015: 4). At the height of the 2016 elections, NTV was faced with this dilemma, which was compounded by the fact that ample preparation for the vibrancy and engagement on social media was not prioritised.

It is understandable that NTV was anxious to keep increasing the numbers of its Facebook followers during the 2016 elections, partly by keeping the platform populated. As observed

by Freedman (2010: 35), audiences of news organisations are on a decline in the face of increasing competition from new types of suppliers, consequently pointing to the near collapse of the existing news environment. This nearing collapse owes to the fact that audiences are deserting them for the immediacy and interactivity of the internet. These new types of suppliers that Freedman speaks of are on the internet and in substantial numbers. This implies that for a television station to effectively compete for the attention of the divided online audience, its platforms ought to be constantly updated.

### **3.4 A conflict of agendas and discourse**

But as television attempts to set the agenda, it is met with the competing agendas of other players who are online to hold discussions on Facebook as a public sphere. These players present their own perspective of things, resulting in a conflict of agendas amongst the television, Facebook followers and state actors as per this study. These diverse agendas are what McCombs (2005: 544) refers to as ‘a multiplicity of agendas.’ In essence, this is a conflict of discourse, with each of the ‘powers’ present online, fronting what they feel should be the dominant discourse.

A case in point is the story posted on 18 February 2016 in which state actors explain the social media shut-down on the day of the elections. The story reads, “ED UCC, Godfrey Mutabazi says Mobile Money and social media were shut down because there was information that people were using these to bribe voters.” ED stands for Executive Director, and UCC is Uganda Communications Commission. In reaction to this story, one of the followers introduces a different aspect of the elections and posts, “There are no ballots in opposition strongholds, be fair as we transition from H.E M7 to our DR. BESIGYE.” This post is picked up by other followers concerned about the absence of ballots:

The government has failed to disperse voting material in time at the polling stations but can manage to cut off and sensor the media because it can!!! If this isn't an outright abuse of power and violation of people's freedoms, I don't know what it is then. People who are still voting need to notice this and vote to change the situation in our country. This abuse of power should stop. *#votethedictatorout*.

The interpretation of such posts of user preferences is that even in the face of media's attempts at online agenda setting, people still use Facebook as a public sphere where they are at liberty to bring other topics for discussion. This demonstrates that they have agency in deciding topics and the direction of discourse, further emphasising the argument that Facebook is a public sphere for free expression of views, not as dictated by the media's agenda.

In describing this situation of competing agendas, which are further understood in this paper as competing struggles for hegemony over discourse, Fairclough (1998: 147) critiques the media for not being the obvious place for the demonstration and determination of professional political discourse. This is because the media itself is involved in what Fairclough (1998) describes as a “power struggle to achieve hegemony.”

In a discussion on how people determine what issues are more relevant, Miller (2007: 692–693), observes that even when the media makes some issues more accessible than others, this does not mean that people will take these issues to be of relevance. Miller (2007) argues that people choose the relevance of issues as guided by a number of factors. These include the negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety that a particular news story arouses. If a story arouses any of these emotions, people tend to pay more attention to the story and engage with its contents. This is the case as seen in the scenario above, in which Facebook followers have instead chosen to ask about a different story from what is presented in the media. The story of choice is related to missing voting material at the peak of elections. This story has arguably aroused the anxiety that Miller (2007) talks about, and is therefore deemed more relevant by the Facebook followers.

This therefore presents Facebook as a liberated space where various issues are presented by followers and conclusively discussed. The irony is that whereas NTV posts a given story as a show of authority and power over the online political discourse, this authority is seen to be neutralised as followers on Facebook discuss both the story contents and other issues of preference. It is on this premise that this paper argues that the agenda-setting role of traditional television conflicts with the discursive nature of the Facebook public sphere. Facebook arguably has the power to disrupt the unilateral agenda-setting role of traditional media. And in essence, Facebook also has the power to disrupt the struggle for hegemony by taking it from the agents or organisations that have traditionally been known to hold such power and redistributing it amongst all players online. It can therefore be concluded that ordinary followers who converge in the Facebook public sphere are safeguarding its discursive nature by exercising control over both the media agenda-setting role and the assumed power of the media over national discourse. Whereas Fortunato and Martin (2016: 129–130), consider Facebook as a nexus of content from media houses, agendas of different individuals and organisations, new communication platforms, audiences seeking information and the laws governing election campaign policy, this thesis argues that it is more than just a nexus. It is a struggle for control of this communicative space by different actors who converge online.

### **3.5 Facebook as an advertising platform**

Followers on social media are known to engage with posts that are informative, entertaining and those that contain remuneration (Gaber and Wright, 2014: 57). A Facebook page of a media house would in this case fall under an informative social media platform and therefore a constant source of engagement. This study found that beneath NTV's plan for instant sharing of news content on Facebook was an embedded intention to draw numbers to be 'sold' to potential advertisers. Advertisers are known to be attracted by the possibilities of more accurately targeted audiences online. This is especially so since traditional news organisations no longer have the privileged position of delivering the world to their audiences (Freedman, 2010: 35). The editors interviewed at NTV confirm that a need to attract advertisers is one of the intentions in populating content on Facebook, and that it is worth the effort.

Whenever we are marketing the stations to advertisers, we tell them these are the number of people that you can get on Facebook, especially when we are selling live broadcasts. We tell them, look, this is the talk-ability you are able to generate from all this (Respondent A, 14 April 2018).

Whereas the need to attract advertisers is true for traditional media's Facebook engagements, it is also true that netizens expect adverts to reach them in this sphere. As noted by Killian and McManus (2015: 540), mass media communication channels have traditionally been known for allowing brand managers to reach out to prospective customers. But with the onset of social media, this role has undergone a revolution. In this revolution, consumers expect the brand to interact with them in a medium where the consumers control the conversation. Advertising on social media now forms part of the different strategies employed by companies as part of their integrated marketing communication efforts (Gaber and Wright, 2014: 53). In addition, Robertson et al. (2010) note that consumers online enjoy the advantage of interaction amongst themselves and with business.

Furthermore, the growing numbers on Facebook imply that one can reach the desired consumers without any financial risk (Robertson et al., 2010: 25–26). The lessened financial risk is indeed true for NTV, where, as noted by one of the editors, the TV station stands more to gain from Facebook compared to any expenses of using the platform:

There are a lot of advantages around the number of followers you have on social media because one is that the digital platform is now a revenue cash cow for NTV. We now have contracts with different companies who are sharing content for us to post on our social media platforms. The reason they are coming to us is because of the numbers. We reach more people than they would reach on their platforms. We are looking at about 4% of our revenue coming from our digital platforms. It is still very small, but it is the fastest growing. If there is any platform making money for us without necessarily spending, it is digital (Respondent B, 17 April 2018).

Gaber and Wright (2014) further discuss the two forms of advertising on Facebook. In one of these forms, advertisers pay for their adverts to appear on the home pages of Facebook users/companies. The other type of advertising involves companies setting up pages and getting fans to like the page. Such fans will then be able to see any posts/adverts on the page. This study concerns itself with the latter form, as fans or followers of the NTV Facebook page use this platform to express themselves on the country's political discourse. In this latter form, any adverts or promotional content posted by NTV is by default viewed by the followers. One of the advantages of advertising on Facebook is the ability to customise an advert and successfully target a specific audience by gender, location, demography and other considerations (Gaber and Wright, 2014).

It can be concluded therefore that NTV's online agenda setting explained above, is complementary to the intention to grow the number of online followers. It is therefore incumbent upon the television station to keep its Facebook platform constantly updated.

Faced with the fact that television audiences are on a decline and with them the advertising revenues, expansion into online platforms is in this case seen as a way to redeem both the advertising revenues and dwindling audiences (Dwyer, 2010: 3).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This paper aimed at illustrating that the Facebook platform is used by television in Uganda, and by extension further afield, as an extension of the newsroom. On the platform, the traditional media carries its known roles of agenda setting and dissemination of information to a waiting mass audience, who have been known to possess little access to facts/events. Whereas the interactive nature of Facebook changes this notion to allow netizens substantial power to dictate discourse and present their account of events, traditional media is seen to be less engaging on this inherently interactive platform. Topics for debate are brought by Facebook followers from their own experiences of events in their surroundings. The ensuing Facebook discussions are similar to Habermas' public sphere when citizens met in coffee houses and discussed both what was published in the newspapers and what was happening in society. This is therefore further confirmation that Facebook is indeed a public sphere (Castells, 2008; Lim, 2009) that traditional media has attempted to transform into a mass media platform for setting the agenda on the country's political discourse.

In conclusion, therefore, the perpetual conflict between traditional media and social media will arguably carry on as long as mass media attempts to turn social media into a one-way communication platform, or what this paper describes as mass mediatisation of social media. But as social media continues to be widely taken on in Uganda and perhaps elsewhere, the possibility of it changing the mass media logic is inevitable.

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