FORUMS OF DEBATE?
WHATSAPP AND THE GAMBIA'S POLITICAL TRANSITION

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#GAMBIA HAS DECIDED
for a new beginning

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Front cover image credit: Jason Florio.
The Gambia, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter are directly, and indirectly, shaping politics. Even though smartphone access remains limited to a small percentage of citizens, these are often disproportionately influential individuals. Furthermore, information that is shared online regularly shapes offline debates and discussions on radio talk shows for example, meaning that its penetration, though hard to measure, is much wider than user data suggests.

The transformative impact of these platforms came to the fore in the democratic ouster of Yahya Jammeh in 2016. Political organisation online, working closely with offline structures and actors, was key in uniting opposition and Jammeh’s defeat at the polls. The same combination of online and offline mobilisation was then critical in ensuring that those results were respected.

Gambian democracy needed an overhaul after 22 years of dictatorship. Since 2017, security sector reform, a constitutional review process and the creation of a Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) have all been part of that process. Despite progress, these efforts have been hampered by political machinations. This research brief draws on interviews and focus group discussions to look at how social media is shaping The Gambia’s post-Jammeh political transition, and to assess the role it might play in presidential elections schedule for the second half of 2021.

TRRC hearings are live streamed on television, Facebook, and YouTube, and debated concurrently across social media. These online discussions are part of the search for truth in The Gambia, and are shaping it, even if efforts to politicise narratives are common. At the same time, social media continues to improve governance in The Gambia by interrogating falsehoods, improving transparency and raising citizens voices in the quest for accountability. But when used to spread false and malicious rumours it can also undermine these efforts. With presidential elections schedule for 2021 there are concerns that social media will be (ab)used for political goals that exacerbate existing ethno-political divisions in the country.

All political parties have already established online structures for sharing messages and mobilising their supporters on WhatsApp. In addition to creating these networks that supporters pay a small fee to join, they have also established smaller groups for party officials where political communication strategies are debated, discussed and developed before being pushed into more public fora that are built around social structures and through which messages, particularly audios in local languages, spread more organically.

WhatsApp will be a key part of political communication in the election. In recognition of this, the paper concludes with some recommendations for amplifying the positive uses and negating the misuses of these WhatsApp networks, and social media more generally. It identifies how they can be used to improve transparency, generate greater accountability in governance and support the deepening of The Gambia’s hard-earned, but nascent, democracy.
Forums of Debate? WhatsApp and The Gambia’s political transition

Early January 2020 Gambians listened to the familiar voice of their former president of 22 years on their smartphones. In a WhatsApp audio leaked by his own political party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), Yahya Jammeh promised to return to the country almost three years after he was forced into exile in Equatorial Guinea after losing the December 2016 elections. Later that week several thousand of his supporters demonstrated on the outskirts of the Gambian capital, Banjul, for his return.

The 2020 recording was not the first time that a WhatsApp audio involving Jammeh had gone viral in The Gambia. But whilst the promise to return from exile had been a coordinated and strategic leak, a June 2016 audio recorded at a political rally, where Jammeh attacked and made derogatory remarks about the Mandinka ethnic group - the largest ethnic group in the country - in Wolof, was not.

Despite efforts to deny its veracity, the recording spread across Gambian social media and its contents were discussed and covered by national and international media. BBC journalist Umaru Fofana, who reported on the election campaign later that year, remarked on the predominance of anti-Jammeh remarks he heard from Mandinka’s across the country; something that had been less apparent in previous elections he covered.

"Social media was very decisive in the 2016 elections" says Dr Ismaila Cessay, a political science lecturer at the University of The Gambia. For Ceesay there are two main reasons, "first, it showed Jammeh was just an ordinary person, it helped to demystify him...and second, it played a key role in mobilising people and getting them to come together".

In October 2016, the United Democratic Party (UDP), the most vocal political opponents of Jammeh’s regime, officially joined the six-party opposition coalition. It marked the first time that Gambian opposition had presented a united electoral front to Jammeh. With many political activists based outside the country for their own safety, Facebook and private messaging applications like WhatsApp, offered ways for raising awareness among the international community. But they were also able to bring divergent diaspora groups together and unite them behind a common goal.

1 The full transcript is available here - https://www.gambia.dk/forums/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=14944
3 Ceesay, I. 2020. Key Informant Interview: Lecturer, University of The Gambia. 25 February.
Unlike traditional media outlets in The Gambia, which were heavily censored under Jammeh, social media platforms offered a forum where critical voices could be heard more freely and more widely. Protests against the Jammeh regime in April 2016, described as “the biggest act of public defiance against the president since he took power in a coup” were ultimately suppressed by loyal security forces but hinted at the growing role of this online movement. In the same month, 95,000 people used the hashtag #GambiaRising on Facebook.

But the Gambian diaspora were not able to vote in 2016, so whilst social media could raise global awareness of the plight facing the West African nation, they needed to find ways to influence voters in the country, and ensure they cast their vote. Facebook and WhatsApp groups were key tools for organisation, mobilisation and the sharing of information at the constituency level.

Diaspora political organisers were supported by in-country allies, who worked to ensure these messages reached sympathetic ears. “We had separate WhatsApp groups for each constituency with teams of volunteers on motorbikes and cars shuttling messages to key voters and voting blocks and extracting firm commitments of support” said one local organiser who was based in Central River Region, “we were so efficient in the micro-targeting of electors that we could count the votes we were likely to get even before the first ballot was cast”.

This claim might be overselling the reality but according to Sait Matty Jaw, a lecturer at the University of The Gambia, “this kind of outreach significantly helped the ground game of the coalition”. Pro-Jammeh supporters were also active online in this period and doing what they could to discredit and curtail the activities of the opposition. But in a sign that they were not having the desired impact, the official two-week period of election campaigning saw the government limit WhatsApp access - it was only available by connection through a virtual private network. Then in the hours before polls opened online traffic slowed to a standstill.

A directive issued by President Yahya Jammeh had shut down the entire internet gateway: telephone calls into and out of the country were impossible. Speaking to the UK Guardian, domestic election observer Jeggan Grey-Johnson said they had been unable to track polling stations because of the internet outage, calling it a “deliberate attempt by the incumbent to control any sort of information sharing”.

Despite this, as the Independent Electoral Commission’s chair, Alieu Momar Njie, began announcing the results, it became increasingly clear that Jammeh was going to lose. When the provisional results were announced on 2 December, his 36.7% share of the vote, placed him second, almost 10% behind coalition candidate, Adama Barrow (45.5%). Perhaps just as surprising as the result, Jammeh initially accepted the outcome and promised to stand down.

But a week later Jammeh announced that he was rejecting the results, citing issues with collation in the eastern region of the country, called for new elections and stationed troops in key locations across the country. Gambians, at home and abroad, refused to cede ground; #GambiaHasDecided became their rallying cry. The hashtag was used to spread

4 Kandeh, D. 2016. “Something unprecedented is happening in The Gambia and you probably have no idea”. Global Voices. 3 May.
5 Camara, S. 2016. “Online media fill crucial gap in Gambia’s search for democracy”. Internet Sans Frontières.
7 Ibid.
messaging online to regional and international audiences - across Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp - that made it clear Gambians wanted their election choice upheld, "we believed a concerted and persistent message of peaceful defiance would undermine the authority of the incumbent president" said one of its initial creators, Salieu Taal.

The online hashtag soon took on a life of its own and spread onto the streets of The Gambia. #GambiaHadDecided was spray-painted on walls in downtown Serekunda, billboards sprung up across the country as quickly as they were torn down by security agents and thousands of free t-shirts with the slogan emblazoned on the front were distributed and worn by Gambians. The movement embolden citizens and gave public support to an under pressure electoral commission.

long with the intervention of leaders from the Economic Community of West African States who applied regional pressure and the threat of military intervention to force Jammeh to accept the 2 December results, "#GambiaHasDecided played a key role in amplifying the voice of the Gambians during the political impasse and was the catalyst that helped in restoration of our democracy" says Taal. On 21 January, seven weeks after Gambians went to the polls, Jammeh left the country for exile in Equatorial Guinea and a new era of democracy could begin in The Gambia.

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9 These figures were subsequently revised by IEC to reflect tallying errors. With the final results giving 43.3% to Barrow and 39.6% to Jammeh.
13 Ibid.,
Radio remains the most common source for news for 73% of Gambians according to an Afrobarometer survey published in early 2020. But 35% of respondents said they checked social media every day or a few times a week for news.

The 2020 We Are Social’s Digital report documented 370,000 social media users in The Gambia in January 2020: equivalent to 16% of the population and a 9.6% increase from April 2019. But these figures are not indicative of the number of Gambians with access to content shared on social media or on private messenger applications such as WhatsApp due to the prominence of phone sharing and the ways in which information originating online, penetrates offline. Recent studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Uganda have illustrated some of the ways in which social media content is used by, and can shape, traditional media such as radio, TV and print.

This is equally the case in The Gambia where radio talks shows, in particular, allow for a crossover of online content into offline spaces. Most WhatsApp groups also replicate offline organisations online, with groups, or forums as they are known in The Gambia, built around faith networks, family structures, political allegiances or community or educational associations. There are also those created with a shared purpose or goal, as was the case with the #GambiaHasDecided campaign. Conducting research for this study it is also clear that the 16% of Gambians who are active on social media are disproportionately influential. In urban areas these can be political activists, journalists, social commentators and religious figures; the types of people who would conventionally shape political debate across traditional media. But there are also a growing number of young Gambians who have found their voice online and whose opinions shape those of their peers.

In rural areas internet penetration is reduced, but in villages where perhaps just one or two smartphones are owned, these will often be in the possession of community, religious or women leaders. Information that these influential figures choose to share with community members from social media comes with added authority given their standing in society.

In leading politically oriented WhatsApp forums like Democratic Gambia – which is comprised of Gambians both within the country and outside - or Facebook pages like What’s On Gambia the latest news circulates rapidly, is debated intensely and shared frequently with friends and family.

A significant amount of the content that is created and pushed through forums is done by the diaspora, who are also not captured in national user figures. The Gambian diaspora remains a very influential voice in politics even if it is more divided in the post-Jammeh era. Divisions have emerged between those supportive of President Barrow and those who retain a strong allegiance to the UDP – the longstanding opposition to Jammeh who Barrow has gradually pushed aside in his three and a half years in office.

There are also a small number of individuals who sympathies lie with the country’s exiled former leader. WhatsApp audios, in the two main languages of Wolof and Mandinka, are the most effective, pervasive and prominent way of sharing information and exchanging views on WhatsApp.

With content ranging from discussions about politics and development, to efforts to build accountability in governance, to debates about religion. The audio format allows smartphones to act as quasi-radios in villages where education levels remain low or mobile penetration is limited. “Even those who don’t have access to smartphones and who have limited education can access the content as people will sit and play audios and videos that are in local languages in group village settings” notes Dr Ceesay, “so even if a rural village has just one phone WhatsApp can make an impact”.

The number of smartphones in circulation in The Gambia is increasing, funded in large part, by its significant diaspora. “If you go to even the very remote villages in The Gambia you will find people with smartphones, most of them are funded by the diaspora as a way of keeping in touch with relatives” notes Haddija Jawara of the Gambia Press Union. “There are people in the villages who think social media is authoritative, that everything that comes to them from online is true. These demographics are easily swayed and say things like, ‘I heard it on the forum’ when asked to justify a rumour”.

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Yet Jawara is cautious about overstating social media’s potential impact, noting that “for now data costs are very high [1.5GB that will last 7 days is D200(US$4)], this is the main limitation for people when it comes to online interactions”²⁰. Residents of rural areas are reliant on the diaspora, not just to buy the phone, but to fund their use of it. In and around the capital however, and among the diaspora, social media is increasingly setting the agenda for political discussion. “If you want to know what is trending in The Gambia, you need to check out WhatsApp and Facebook”²¹ says Dodou Jah, a social media strategist with the APRC.

Whilst greater access to information is being enabled by social media in post-Jammeh Gambia, the information that flows is not always accurate or is heavily politicised. Sometimes content goes viral because of who shares it, other times it can go viral because of the issue being discussed; controversial topics like religion, for example, stir up big debates. But in both instances, the speed at which information is passed through forums in The Gambia makes it difficult to monitor or control.

Nonetheless the government indicated its intention to try and exercise some control when it introduced the Media Service Bill for debate in the legislature in November 2019. Foday Gassama, a member of the National Assembly argued in favour of the Bill, by saying that whilst “social media played an important role in the change of government, today it is being abused. I think the government should act now to look into the issue like what China did to censor information disseminated via social media through technology”. Kerr Fatou, a leading online media outlet, vehemently disagreed, calling it “a calculated attempt to limit the political activities of parties and citizens as well as infringe on freedom of expression and the free press”²². They compared it to the repressive Media Commission Bill issued by Yahya Jammeh in the late 1990s. The Bill was subsequently shelved in the face of public criticism, but it may yet return as debates over the positive and negative uses of social media continue.

For one focus group discussant, “social media can be dangerous for politics in Gambia as people often believe the first thing they see...even if turns out to be false”²³. She cited messages which circulated on WhatsApp ahead of protests against Barrow’s continuation in power²⁴ that compounds would be attacked, which led some families to flee to Senegal. For now, ‘fights’ on social media remain verbal, and do not come offline. For the most part, people who disagree online are often friends in person or regularly meet at social events given The Gambia’s small elite, “so the differences are over how they see politics”²⁵.

On the other hand, social media provides an outlet for individuals and groups to engage, and express dissatisfaction with, the state. Online pressure has played a key role in forcing the government to investigate alleged improper issuance of Gambian diplomatic passports in November 2019. In combination with offline efforts, social media helped push for the government to drop charges against two radio stations that had been shut down during the three-year Jotna protests in late 2019. “Social media puts more pressure on the government than opposing political parties in the National Assembly” says Omar Wally of the The Fatou Network, “in fact this country is increasingly run by social media”²⁶. It certainly is playing a part in shaping a key aspect of The Gambia's transitional justice process, the TRRC.

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²² When taking office in 2017, President Barrow had initially promised to act as a transitional leader and promised to serve just three of his mandated five years. But he has since changed his mind and in addition to serving his full five year term will contest in the 2021 election.
WHATAPP, FACEBOOK and the TRRC: uses and abuses

The Gambia’s eleven-member Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) has heard public testimony from over 200 individuals since January 2019. Created by the 2017 TRRC Act, it seeks to uncover the truth about human rights abuses that took place during Yahya Jammeh’s time in power. With ongoing security sector reform, a constitutional review process nearing its conclusion and what are set to be highly contested presidential polls in late 2021, the TRRC is just one part of The Gambia’s complicated transitional justice process.

The TRRCs public hearings are broadcast live on television networks and streamed through Facebook and YouTube channels, with as many as 6,000 viewers tuning in to watch testimonies relating to some of the most notorious abuses or controversial issues. On both YouTube and Facebook, the comments section provides live reaction from watching members of the public as testimonies are ongoing. Similar, concurrent, conversations are also taking place across WhatsApp forums and on Facebook.

Some are the views of interested individuals, but others are commenting to serve political objectives. Members and supporters of the APRC have consistently sought to delegitimise the TRRC by spreading accusations of witnesses being bribed to give scripted testimony or by attacking the credibility of members of the commission across social media in audio, visual and text formats.

Members of the TRRC’s communication unit, which monitors social media discussions around its work, are confident that the APRC were behind a falsely captioned picture that circulated on social media that suggested the TRRC’s Lead Counsel, Essa Faal, was part of a specific, minority Muslim sect - the Ahmadiyya - and was therefore biased his questioning of the head of the Supreme Islamic Council, Imam Touray during testimony given in February 2020. The image was real and recent but had been taken at an inter-religious event that Faal had attended. Before being shared on social media it had been cropped and mislabelled, deliberately.

“The APRC is the most active in pushing disinformation” says Essa Jallow, the communications head at the TRRC. But they are not alone. It is claimed that a fake ‘TRRC WhatsApp group’ that is in no way linked to the work of the Commission was set up by supporters of the UDP to promote their narratives as if they were the Commission’s.

26 Jallow, E. 2020. Key Informant Interview: Head of Communications & Outreach, TRRC. 25 February.
TRRC monitoring of discussions that take place on Facebook, YouTube and the QTV stream aim to get a sense of the sort of discussions taking place that can better inform their own messaging, which is done only through official channels. "Comments [on social media] often reflect political divisions in the country, especially when witnesses appear who have clearly defined political affiliations" says Jallow, with supporters of political opponents quick to pick holes in their testimony. The fact that discussions are quickly politicised means that "when monitoring the comments that emerge beneath the Facebook live feed, for example, we don't try to engage in public debates online. When we do try to address misconceptions directly, we do so privately, we try to avoid back and forth".

The TRRC spoke with the diaspora as part of its communications outreach in recognition of the important role they play in shaping debate and discussion online. But Jallow believes that responding to social media influencers directly and publicly online is not a good approach as it can "confer a degree of legitimacy on these people". However, the Commission's preference for conventional media channels is not without challenges. These channels are also susceptible to bias. The way many radio stations translate news into local languages or the aspects of the hearings they choose to focus on, can frame discussions about the TRRC in ways that influence how listeners perceive its future hearings.

Beyond debates about the veracity of an individual's testimony, one of the issues that has been a regular feature of discussion in comments and in WhatsApp groups, has been the approach taken by Lead Counsel Faal. "Comments [on social media] often reflect political divisions in the country, especially when witnesses appear who have clearly defined political affiliations".

Civil society activist Alhagie Nyang, believes that whilst, "in theory people should be given a platform to share their testimony as they see it, for me I think we need someone like Faal to bring out the truth when people are not forthcoming with it". In the case of the 'Junglers' the online reaction to Faal's more adversarial and prosecutorial approach was applauded, but his efforts to take the same approach with religious leaders in early 2020, led to him being attacked online.

Some believe that the debates and discussions on social media have even influenced the approach of Faal. Pointing to the fact that several of the, often online, media houses he uses as evidence were diaspora-based entities known for spreading false information about Jammeh during his rule and how "he wants to be seen as having 'won' his duel with a 'witness' as a lot of discussion online is about who is winning the big personality clashes as TRRC".

This points to a wider concern that Facebook and WhatsApp are contributing to an individualising of the TRRC process, making it...
more a personality contest than a quest for the truth. During the hearings Commissioners are regularly seen on their phones and Dr Ceesay believes that they do so to, "get a sense as to how a testimony is being received by segments of the population". Live social media commentary is important in shaping how testimony is subsequently digested and viewed.

For example, when Fatou Jallow appeared at the Commission to give testimony in October 2019, many Gambians were shocked to hear her detail how former President Yahya Jammeh had groomed and then raped her multiple times after she was introduced to him after winning a national beauty pageant. For some, Jallow was celebrated online for breaking a taboo in speaking out in what was described as The Gambia’s #MeToo moment. But many others took to social media as she gave her testimony to undermine and question the account she was giving. They used the voices or silence of other beauty pageant winners who had not been abused or seen Jammeh engage in abusive behaviour to try and undermine Jallow’s testimony. Online discussions in this instance reflected the prevalence of deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes.

Social media cannot fix these divisions, but online campaigns championed by the TRRC, such as #NeverAgain, aim to reconcile Gambians around a common vision for the future online. After more than two decades where debate and discussion were severely constrained, Gambians now have a chance to hear and discuss what took place and to debate the way forward. WhatsApp and social media platforms provide a space to do that.

As one focus group respondent noted, “social media cannot be left behind in the search for truth in the Gambia”. But with the TRRC scheduled to share its recommendations in early 2021, and with elections later that year, The Gambia’s nascent democracy and the role social media plays in shaping it, will be further tested.

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35 Focus Group Discussion: University of the Gambia (Kanifing Campus). 27 February 2020
ELECTORAL POLITICS: moving online?

Given its involvement in the 2016 vote, the usefulness of social media for political organisation and the sharing of campaign messaging and information is something that all political parties are keenly aware of. “Social media will play a significant role in the 2021 presidential election” says Dr Ceesay, “it was already prominent in 2016, but next year there will be more Gambians online, a freer environment and more content for them to consume”.

This research found that all political parties have already established structures to facilitate political communication on WhatsApp. These groups of party supporters, which in some cases require members to pay a small fee to join, are an important outreach, and even fundraising, tool for political parties. Audio messages in local languages are viewed as the most effective method of engagement and this content is often developed in smaller strategy WhatsApp groups open only to party officials. This is where political communication strategies are debated, discussed and developed before being pushed into the network of groups for wider and more organic sharing.

For the most part the aims of political parties and their supporters online are either to boost their candidates own standing or to attack the credibility of a rival. Although parties deny they are involved in creating or spreading misinformation and disinformation, it continues to be a feature of online political communication. In 2016, leader and founder of the Gambia Democratic Congress, Hon. Mama Kandeh, was accused of soliciting support and funds from Boko Haram. These false allegations quickly spread across The Gambia’s forums, despite a quick and public denial by Kandeh.

Despite these risks, WhatsApp for the GDC, like most political parties in The Gambia, will be a key platform for sharing information with supporters and prospective voters in next years election due to its speed and reach. “It allows you to engage with those who can’t physically attend a meeting or a rally and to communicate in local languages through voice notes that can be tailored to local issues” says GDC youth president Momodou Cham Jnr. As a member of the party’s media team, Cham spends 1GB of data every two days spreading messages to promote GDC on social media or discussing politics in WhatsApp forums. In some instances, the party may provide him with funds to purchase 2GB of data (US$6) to go and live-stream a political rally or event on Facebook but these sorts or arrangement are more ad-hoc than...

36 Taylor, Y aka Flex Dan. 2020. Key Informant Interview: Journalist at Gainako Online News. 28 February
37 Cham, M. C. 2020. Key Informant Interview: Youth President, Gambia Democratic Congress. 24 February.
regular. In other cases, the costs are borne by the individual.

In February 2020, GDC had 53 WhatsApp groups, each with the maximum 256 members that it used to push political messages. The UDP had at least 64 groups, the People’s Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS) had 23 and President Barrow’s newly created, National People’s Party (NPP) already had 17. Group admins are linked to the political party and remove those who are not talking frequently or show allegiances that show they are not pro the party. The APRC, Jammeh’s former party, arguably has the largest – over 100 - and most sophisticated network of WhatsApp forums.

“When people join we have them complete a contact form and ask them to pledge to non-violence” says Dodou Jah, who confirmed that executive members of the party were added to each group as admins to provide some level of regulation and oversight, “these admins also share content that is being developed by the party - audios on issues in Mandinka and Wolof for example. The APRC has two smaller WhatsApp groups made up exclusively of party executives, that work on developing this content and the strategies for dissemination.

There is also an APRC ‘CyberWarriors’ WhatsApp group - composed of both people in diaspora and in The Gambia - who are specifically designated with the task of defending the party on Facebook. They claim that these members are given in-house training on how to conduct themselves which includes how to verify content before sharing and encourages them not to use insults. WhatsApp groups are also being used to finance the party. Each member of the group gives a minimum contribution of D100 (US$2) when they join. Special fundraisers, where group members are asked to donate money to hold a rally for example, “can raise like D20,000 (US$400)”, says Jah.

Jah believes the APRC’s online movement is evidence of the support that still exists for the party, and for its exiled leader. He remains confident electoral victory is possible and sees social media as a key component of the campaign strategy. Others are less convinced, “the APRC will not win the vote on their own” says Sait Matty Jaw, but he does recognise that it “can definitely boost any party [if The Gambia adopts a constitutional reform that could lead to a second round of voting], it’s certainly not the dead party some people seem to think.”

President Barrow is also mobilising supporters online. His political party, the NPP, can call on the support of the President Barrow Youths for National Development (PDYFND), which operates online and offline across The Gambia. It was officially established to give youth the chance to support the president’s activities and help him realise his agenda. Members – of which the group claims there are 90,000, many of whom pay a small fee to join - are involved in building boreholes and providing loosely defined support to communities, with many active defenders and promoters of Barrow, and the NPP, across social media. PDYFND elected president Ansu Singateh has direct access to the President, “I can go and meet him [Barrow] directly and explain what PDYFND is doing and he can help guide me on what we might also want to do.”

38 In Gambia political groups are open until filled. Once this happens another is opened. Most are labelled, 1, 2, 3 and so on making it possible to get a sense of the number in operation. Figures accurate as of end of February 2020. 39 Sanneh, K. 2020. Key Informant Interview: Journalist. 26 February. 40 Jah, D. 2020. Key Informant Interview: APRC official. 26 February. 41 Ibid., 42 Matty Jaw, S. 2020. Key Informant Interview: lecturer, University of The Gambia. 17 April. 43 Singateh, A. 2020. Key Informant Interview: President of President Barrow Youths for National Development. 27 February.
Given this connection, political opponents, such as UDP leader Ousainou Darboe, have criticised it for being more akin to a political party than the support group the government claims it be to, even though the UDP has a similar network of promoters across the country. Commentators have drawn parallels between these structures and that of Jammeh's 'Green Youths', though the violence they were tasked with carrying out on Jammeh's behalf in the last decade of his rule, is not yet a feature of the PDYFND.

But in every region PDYFND WhatsApp groups have been created that are managed by regional focal persons and informed by the work of smaller national executive WhatsApp group. Singateh denies that this executive is involved in the spread of fake news or malicious content, "we are trying to win over new supporters and potential voters, but not attacking opponents, we believe we can do so with respect". Independent observers disagree. There are what one respondent calls "social media bullies": supporters of a political party or agenda, often on their own initiative, who will target and attack individuals who post anything that paints the actions of their party or candidate in a negative light. Whilst WhatsApp groups can help parties to mobilise their supporters and increase, and improve internal and external political debate and discussion, they can also be used to drive and amplify divisions.

WhatsApp will be a key election communication tool for all political parties. “Even though 60% of Gambians are uneducated and living in rural areas, it is still possible to reach them with voice notes in local languages if you take phones to these communities and play messages” says Singateh. Pointing to a merging of more traditional offline campaign activities, with online approaches. With the Gambian diaspora set to be able to vote after an announcement by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in June 2020, parties will also be looking to use online structures to win votes outside the country for the first time.

But there are concerns that whilst the diaspora remains a very prominent voice across forums in The Gambia, such voices are less likely to suffer the direct consequences of making inflammatory political or ethnic statements and therefore more likely to use them. Political party, along with ethnicity and religion, are key identifiers in The Gambia, with growing concerns that the first two are increasingly merging and creating a more ethnicised political space ahead of next year's elections. For Ceesay, the coming elections are likely to see "a rise in hate speech, and ethnic tensions... considering it will be the first 'real' elections for many, it could be a potentially explosive affair". Social media may exacerbate these tensions just as it can also be used to dampen them.

44 Ibid.,
45 Singateh, A. 2020. Key Informant Interview: President of President Barrow Youths for National Development. 27 February.
CONCLUSIONS

In The Gambia WhatsApp, Facebook and other social media platforms are directly, and indirectly, shaping politics. Even though smartphone access remains limited to a small percentage of citizens, these are often disproportionately influential. Furthermore, information that is shared online regularly shapes ‘offline’ debates and discussions on radio talk shows for example, meaning that its penetration, though hard to measure, is much wider.

Undoubtedly WhatsApp and Facebook have the potential to support more engaged citizen interaction with authorities and to widen the opportunity for debate and discussion. However, this research shows that they are also reinforcing pre-existing divisions along ethnic and political lines in The Gambia. This is a challenge as the country seeks to conclude its delicate transitional justice process, and hold presidential elections in 2021.

Given the growing prominence of social media use by political parties, and the undoubted ways that it is playing a part in shaping The Gambia’s wider transition, this brief provides a series of recommendations that can ensure the positive impacts of more transparent, engaged and accountable politics are enhanced and potential negative uses to spread false and misleading information, reduced. These are divided between efforts targeted at the upcoming election and those which can contributed more broadly to more engaged and transparent governance.
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Election-specific recommendations**

Given its wider listenership, weekly radio segments with prominent Gambian fact-checkers, increasing to daily as the election draws closer, that are also streamed live on Facebook. These programmes – held in English, Wolof, Mandinka and other local languages - would aim to explore two or three leading stories for that week or day, to understand their origin, the veracity of the content and where inaccurate, to provide alternative information. These could then be recorded and shared to influential WhatsApp forums for organic dissemination.

Create 'listening clubs' to discuss what is debated on radio talk shows and social media about politics at the village level across The Gambia. These would aim to stimulate further debate and discussion among citizens about transparent and accountable governance, as well as misinformation, and would be overseen by local moderators, trained on these themes.

Bring together political parties to draw up, and then publicly agree to, a social media code of conduct for the election campaign that would improve the discussion online. These codes of conduct would apply to all party members, or those registered by the party as part of their WhatsApp lists and would be enforced by citizen and media monitoring rather than any formal judicial mechanism.

Provide technical support to the IEC to develop its social media strategy for the 2021 election. This could focus on how to use the different social media platforms to engage voters, share information on procedural matters and how to tackle the threat posed by misinformation and disinformation, learning from the TRRC’s experiences and from approaches used by electoral commissions in the region, like Ghana.

Establish a social media election centre for the two-week campaign period and results period that would be staffed by a team of trained fact-checkers and election/political experts who can provide impartial information on happenings through social media. A network of citizen reporters throughout the country would allow for a near ‘real-time’ fact-checking process to happen.

Facilitate media interviews with leading candidates from political parties about key issues in their manifestos on Facebook Live and Twitter. In addition to questions from the interviewers, space can be given for Gambians to submit their own questions using WhatsApp and Facebook, to be asked in a segment of the interview that would aim to focus election campaigns around issues and policy promises.
Wider recommendations

Improved digital literacy, combined with civic literacy, remains the most sustainable solution as it gives citizens the tools and skills to make their own decisions when it comes analysing the information they receive online. In the short-term, this should be targeted at trusted local actors - women leaders, traditional authorities, youth movement leaders, religious figures - as the source. In the longer-term, sustained efforts to improve digital literacy can focus on the inclusion of critical thinking and the use of digital platforms into education curricula and the use of online courses and interactive teaching games, to educate those outside of the education system.

Messaging campaigns across social media platforms to encourage people to stop, check and critically analyse content they receive before sharing or relaying it can be developed and should aim to use online influencers and trusted local leaders to spread these messages. But these efforts should not just be confined to an online setting. They can be spread through traditional media outlets - radio, TV and print media - and even through in-person approaches such as town-halls and community debates, with discussions taking place in English, Wolof, Mandinka and other local languages.

Establish a network of citizen fact-checkers that are based across the country, keeping in mind the importance of being a trusted source in how messages are interpreted. These can counter falsehoods being shared online, but also contribute to citizens thinking more critically about the information they receive and share on a whole range of issues. Speed, while retaining high standards of validating information, is key, as is ensuring that fact-checking is done in Wolof and Mandinka, as well as English.

Ensure that once passed into law, Sections 44 and 45 of the newly drafted Gambian Constitution, on freedom of expression and freedom of the media, are both applied in practice and understood by the population more widely. This can involve producing written and audio jingles to explain the limits on the freedom of expression for example and engaging civil society and the media to advocate for the prevention of internet shutdowns using Section 45 2(b) of the still to be finalised basic law.

Draw together key stakeholders from a cross sector of backgrounds - media, civil society, government, political parties, academia and traditional leaders - to form a Social Media monitoring group that meets bi-monthly, to discuss key issues and chart ways forward on how the platforms can be used to increase transparency and accountability and governance. This group can also be a focal point for engaging with the social media companies.

Engage Facebook - which also owns WhatsApp - and Twitter to ensure that these companies have the capacity - in Mandinka and Wolof - to remove content and users that use hate speech on these platforms.

Establish and enforce a data protection act that covers online users, in line with the 2010 Supplementary Act on Personal Data Protection within ECOWAS.
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