

Report on Online Mobilisation of Anti-Government Protests in Kenya

July 18, 2024





Introduction

The June 2024 public protests in Kenya against governance issues brought to fore the place and role of citizen-led efforts to mobilise and conduct public civic education. Approaching the organisation of the series of country-wide public demonstrations through mass mobilisation done effectively on digital platforms, the masses have proved the significance of social media in creating spaces for conversation on national issues and by extension the framing of the matters through the citizens/users lense. The gatekeepers in the media and communication space in the country, just like in the rest of the world have tremendously changed and as an earlier study by the Media Council of Kenya on the impact of technology on media practice in Kenya established; “access to mobile and digital technologies and their increasing application in Kenya have had numerous consequences on media production, dissemination, reception and consumption.”

“From a consumer perspective, it is abundantly clear that their consumption of, and interactions with media is enriched thanks to technology. Ordinary people can participate in media productions. The developments mean they can consume and produce content (user generated content, and now they are aptly referred to as prosumers) and sometimes inform. This active involvement means they can challenge mainstream media dominance. In effect, some of the marginalised communities, or those who feel their issues are hardly given space in mainstream media, can utilise

technology to articulate their issues. The rise of citizen journalism is built on such premises. Besides, consumers can now become more demanding of media in the sense that they want information or products that are relevant to them”.

Online communication tools such as X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube have changed the way conversations happen in Kenya. People previously unable to join national conversation in the media spaces are now increasingly involved in media business by creating content, conducting mass mobilisation, contributing stories, pictures, and audio-visual material for publication by mainstream media, leading to the growing practice of what is commonly referred to as digital or indeed networked journalism. In essence, people, can easily ‘tell’ their own stories by side-stepping information gatekeepers or middlepersons who once controlled information and media products.

A number of Scholars (Bakker and Sada-ba, 2008, Steur (1994: 84) and Jensen (1998: 201), have discussed how digital technologies have offered the user so many opportunities and power to determine what they want to consume, to the extent the user can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time and ‘let the user exert an influence on the content or form of the mediated communication’. This is pronounced in the rise of X, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook and other similar social media platforms.

1.1 Online influence and transformation of anti-government protests in Kenya

June 2024 marked the beginning of anti-government protests in Kenya. Planning and execution were done mainly through online platforms (X and TikTok). The main proponents of the movement have been attributed to the vibrancy of young people 'Gen Z' and millennials. Initially the protests were against the imposition of tax hikes by the government, but they however morphed into destruction of property and deaths-Media reports <https://tinyurl.com/mty6e6md> indicate that so far 50 young people have lost their lives during the month long protests that were held on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The planning and execution of the public protests, unlike those in the past, were marked by evolutionary trends that challenged traditional methods that previously had political undertones. This report delves into characteristics of the protests, and the nuances as depicted during the demonstrations and explores how the Kenyan Gen Z utilised technology and developed new forms of cohesion to advocate for a future they envision.

During the protests, hashtags **#RejectFinanceBill**, **#OccupyParliament**, **#RutoMustGo**, **#OccupyStatehouse**, **#OccupyChurches**, **#OccupyCBD**, **#AngukaNayo** were pushed to trend and occupy prime time in the media and communication space, thus setting the agenda on national conversations. These hashtags spurred real-time updates and information dissemination attracting international attention and increasing pressure on the Kenyan government to respond to the protesters' demands. The young people during the protests iden-

tified themselves as "leader-less, tribe-less and fear-less."

It is also worth noting that unlike previous protests in the country that were mostly organised by the elite and the political class, young people used technology to mobilise and set the agenda during the processes. The participation in protests was physical while some spread the word by sharing messages, pictures, and videos on social media.

Social media channels such as X, Facebook, Zello, WhatsApp, and TikTok became vital tools for mobilising participants, disseminating information, and coordinating activities. This digital shift enabled greater inclusivity, allowing young people of various regions and demographics to participate in the protests without the logistical and safety constraints associated with physical gatherings.

The narratives and themes shaping the protests were significantly influenced by conversations on social media. This consistent messaging helped maintain a strong, unified front among protesters and supporters.

The adaptation to digital activism has been evident, as protesters have leveraged technology to overcome challenges such as internet disruptions and government surveillance. The use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and decentralised communication apps like Zello has ensured secure and continuous communication, demonstrating the resilience and resourcefulness of the movement. This proactive approach has allowed protesters to effectively coordinate and sustain their efforts despite external pressures.



1.2 Impact of online mobilisation

The impact of online mobilisation has led to significant changes in Kenya's political landscape over the years especially in public life. Through pressure, advocacy and sharing of critical information on public issues, the government succumbed to these demands and did several things in response including withdrawal of the Finance Bill 2024, dismissal of Cabinet Secretaries & the Attorney General, toning down on political sentiments, and increased engagement from political leaders, including President William Ruto and Cabinet participation in @XSpaces, highlighting the power of digital activism.

The digital platforms facilitated dialogue and accountability, bridging the gap between the government and the public. The evolution of protest strategies, from initial awareness campaigns to sophisticated coordination and fundraising efforts, underscores the adaptability and effectiveness of online mobilisation in challenging poor governance thereby driving societal change.

Social media



Facebook



Instagram



WhatsApp



X



YouTube



Telegram



Gmail

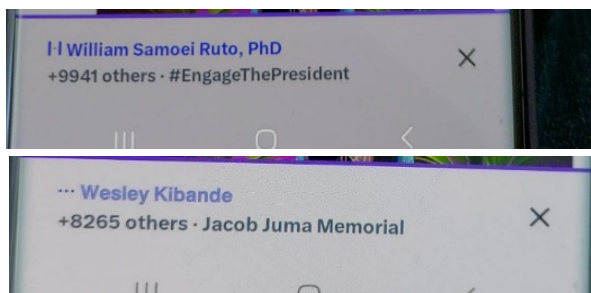


Defamation and Data Privacy Breaches

The Data Protection Act of Kenya, enacted in 2019, provides a comprehensive legal framework for the protection of personal data. It outlines strict guidelines for the collection, processing, and storage of personal data to ensure privacy and security. Key provisions of the Act include the requirements for data controllers and processors to obtain informed consent from individuals before handling their data, the obligation to process data in a lawful, fair, and transparent manner, and the necessity to implement robust security measures to protect data against unauthorised access or breaches. The Act also grants individuals rights such as being informed about the collection and use of their data, accessing their data, requesting correction or deletion of inaccurate data, and objecting to the processing of their data. Organisations are required to ensure data security and promptly report any data breaches. Additionally, the Act establishes the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner, tasked with monitoring compliance, addressing grievances, and enforcing the provisions of the Act.

As expected, there were several instances during the anti-government protests where defamation and data privacy breaches were observed, highlighting the complexities of online activism. Activists referred to an X account purportedly associated with Jacob Juma; a controversial political figure who died in 2016. Notably, an account created in July 2018 after Juma's death gained prominence, amassing 12.9K followers. This pseudo account, named after Jacob Juma, actively engaged in organising a counter X space during President William Ruto's engagement with netizens on July 5, 2024. In contrast, Juma's authentic X account, established in February 2011 and with 95.3K followers, had its last post on March 27, 2016. The pseudo account continued to post actively, demonstrating ongoing activity that could confuse public perception and potentially defame the late Juma's legacy.

- Link to the pseudo-X account: <https://x.com/WhatEHappened?t=sqOkI3IlaNNqWI5tX6UQp-g&s=09>
- Link to the authentic-X account: <https://x.com/kabetes>



Screenshots show the pseudo account orchestrating a counter X Space during the president's engagement with netizens.

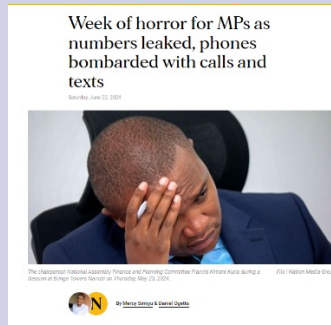
Additionally, during the protests a trend emerged where personal data of individuals from both state and private entities was shared publicly. This was aimed at holding leaders to account over what is claimed as failed delivery of services, to influence their decision making. The sharing of personal phone numbers was meant to disparage and intimidate some leaders for their decisions to support the Finance Bill, 2024. The campaigns were carried out by those who supported the demos and those who opposed. Those targeted were bombarded with dozens of messages and insults and equally messages of goodwill. The latest attempt was one that was directed towards Royal Media Services (RMS) staff; Linus Kaikai, Yvonne Okwara and Mashirima Kapombe.

Social media users and public figures expressed concerns about the role of the media outlet in social unrest. The hashtag **#TheGenocideMedia** highlighted the perceived negative impact of biased coverage during the protests. The counter narrative by pro-government online users however did not go as planned and instead those targeted were commended for their excellent work. The ODPC shared a cautionary letter advising the public to refrain from further sharing personal information that infringes on the rights of individuals to privacy. The trend remains rife.



<https://x.com/MigunaMiguna/status/1812468067558961549>

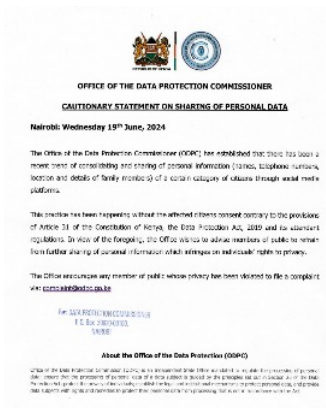
<https://x.com/MKapombe/status/1813982843502256315>



<https://x.com/LinusKaikai/status/1813978552703832157>

<https://nation.africa/kenya/news/week-of-horror-for-mps-as-numbers-leaked--4665840>

A look at activities surrounding data privacy, from leaks to positive and negative outcomes



https://x.com/ODPC_KE/status/1803365292405313615

Letter to the public by the ODPC

Social media



Role of **Social Media** Platforms

A. X

The Dissemination of Information through X/@XSpaces

The X Space played a critical role in mobilising youths and activists during Kenya's anti-government protests, providing a robust platform for mobilisation, strategic communication, and coordination. Beginning on 22 June 2024, the platform witnessed a surge in engagement after *Sir-Rap-A-Lot* (https://twitter.com/Osama_otero), along with other co-hosts, initiated an X space titled *"Good Morning Kenya: Where is the crazy Nairobian?"* This session, sparked by the abduction of prominent X user BillyTheGoat (https://twitter.com/_CrazyNairobian), *galvanised over 1.2 million sign-ins over a 7-hour period (over 50,000 accounts logged in)*. The space not only disseminated critical information on protest plans and venues but also attracted senior government officials like former Transport CS Kipchumba Murkomen and Senate Majority Leader Aaron Cheruiyot, fostering dialogue amidst heightened tensions.

Topics discussed during the space included:

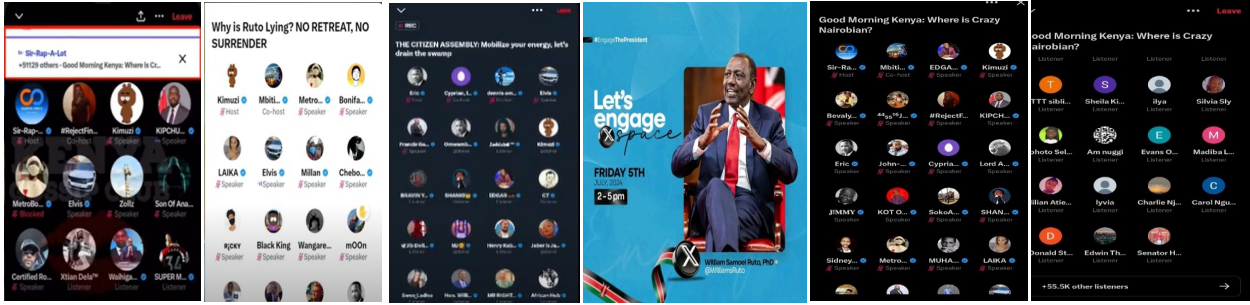
- The arrest of Kenyan content creator Billy Simani, known as Crazy Nairobian. Participants questioned his whereabouts and called for his release under the hashtag #FreeBilly.
- The space quickly evolved into a broader discussion about the bill, with participants explaining its potential impact on their lives and voicing their dissatisfaction with the government.
- The ongoing protests against the Finance Bill. Participants urged others to join the planned #TotalShutdown protests, emphasising the importance of peaceful demonstrations.
- The government's response to the

protests. Some political leaders who joined the space faced criticism for dismissing the protests, while participants refuted claims that the protests were sponsored.

- The role of the youth, particularly Gen Z, in the ongoing political discourse. The participants discussed the need for civic education, voter registration, and holding leaders accountable.

On June 26, 2024, following concessions by President William Ruto and the withdrawal of Finance Bill 2024, X user *Kimuzi* (https://twitter.com/Kimuzi_) hosted a space titled *"Why is Ruto Lying?? No Retreat, No Surrender,"* drawing over 120K listeners. This platform became instrumental in discussing the president's statements and deliberating on the future of the demonstrations. Additionally, popular user Eric (<https://twitter.com/amerix>) hosted *"The Citizen's Assembly"* on July 7 and 14, 2024, attracting 60K listeners per session and addressing governance issues. Topics discussed during the space include Going Protests Against the Finance Bill 2024, the role of the assemblies in enhancing public participation in governance, empowerment of citizens, resource allocation and management, and calls for accountability.

As the protests approached in June 20, 2024, activists leveraged X and other social media platforms to evade surveillance of traditional communication channels, notably expanding onto X by June 21. These discussions quickly amassed participation from an estimated 55.5K Kenyans, underscoring X's pivotal role in mobilising, informing, and empowering protestors during a critical juncture in Kenya's political landscape.



X Space for Fundraising

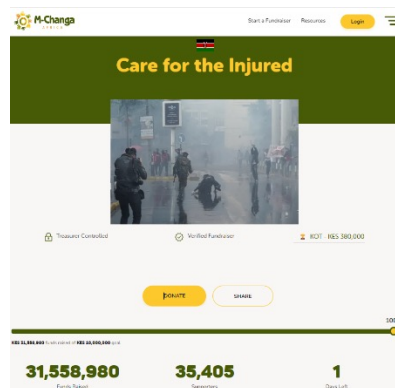
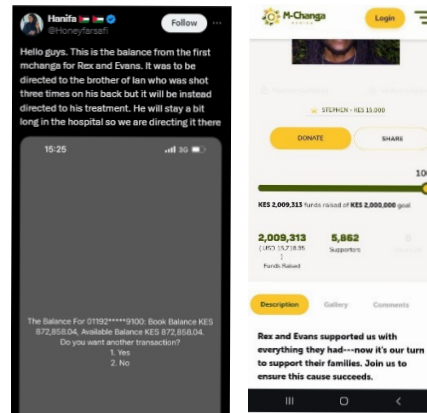
During the protests and amidst tragic losses such as the deaths of Rex Kanyike Masai on June 20, 2024, and Evan Kiratu on June 25, 2024, citizens used the same platforms especially the X community to support their families. *Hanifa* (<https://twitter.com/Honeyfarsafi>), an activist, print journalist, and influencer, led fundraising efforts using X. Through M-Changa, a digital fundraising platform, *Hanifa* created a dedicated link to gather financial contributions aimed at covering funeral expenses for the deceased protestors.

The campaign successfully raised KShs 3,052,989, with over 7,000 Kenyans contributing. This collective response not only provided financial relief but also demonstrated the solidarity and support within the X community during times of hardship and tragedy.

Furthermore, *Hanifa* also initiated another fundraising, this time directed towards care of the injured on Wednesday, June 3, 2024. The fundraising has since raised KShs 31,558,980.00 from 35,405 supporters. The two underestimate the value of social networks, crowd funding, wide reach, and motivated population.



Screenshots of the M-Changa link used, the first Hanifa transaction balance, and live donation updates.



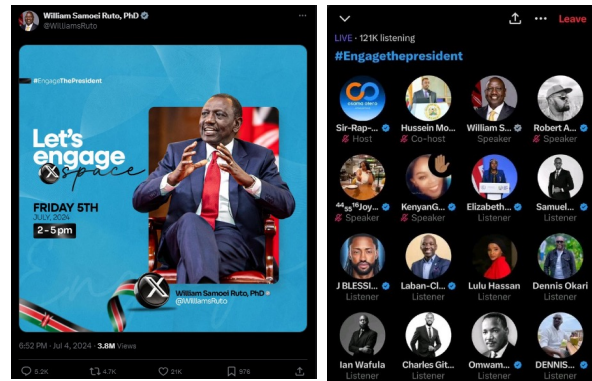
Screenshot of Hanifa's initiative to care for the injured on 22 July 2024.

X Space for Dialogue

Topics discussed during the spaces revolved around concerns with the government where protesters criticised well-paid officials in the executive and parliament for living large while imposing austerity on the public through heavy taxation. Protesters also outlined grievances stemming from the Finance Bill, 2024 but this was a precursor to much wider sources of discontent, such as youth unemployment, police brutality, and casualties during the peaceful demonstrations. Questions and comments challenged the government’s response to the protests, with direct references to alleged casualties and police brutality that saw many over fifty people killed. Issues of governance, lack of accountability among leaders led the President to shelve the contentious Finance Bill 2024 after protesters stormed parliament. The protestors have vowed to press on with demonstrations despite the withdrawal of the bill, dismissal of cabinet secretaries, President austerity measures and decision to engage the young people on X.

The proliferation of the X space as a medium for dialogue caught the attention of Kenya’s leadership and on July 5, 2024, under the hashtag **#EngageThePresident**. According to the BBC article, President Ruto’s X Space dialogue with young Kenyans drew **163,000 participants for 3 hours of engagement**. This was a substantial number, though modest compared to Kenya’s total population. The space faced initial technical challenges, with many participants encountering difficulties connecting with social media influencer *Sir-Rap-A-Lot* (https://twitter.com/Osama_otero). This session facilitated a candid exchange in which Kenyans confronted the President on pressing issues such as alleged abductions, police brutality, governance shortcomings, and the competence of his appointments. President Ruto acknowledged the direct feedback, express-

ing gratitude for the robust and transparent engagement. The event underscored X’s role in fostering accountable leadership and inclusive dialogue amid societal challenges.



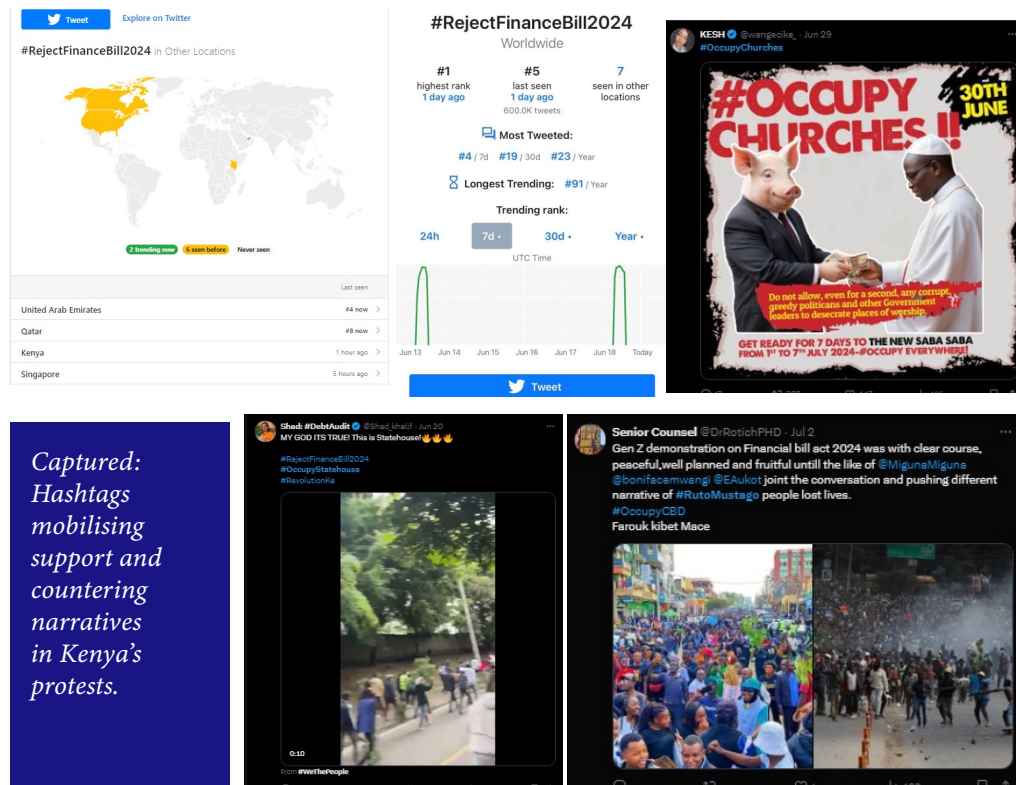
Screenshots from the X space featuring President William Ruto engaging in dialogue with Kenyans.

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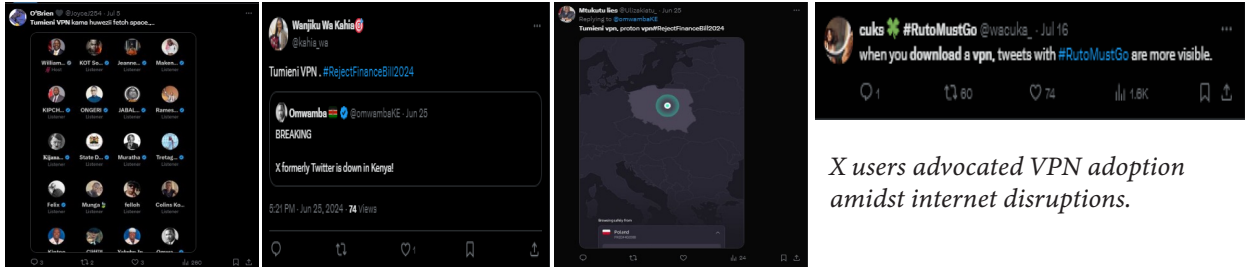
X for mobilising support and counter-narratives

X played a pivotal role in mobilising support and shaping counter-narratives during Kenya's anti-government protests. Hashtags like **#RejectFinanceBill2024**, **#OccupyCBDTuesday**, and **#OccupyParliament** galvanised widespread support with **#RejectFinanceBill2024** achieving global prominence on June 20, 2024, garnering over 600K tweets. Additionally, **#RutoMustGo** emerged as a prominent call for political change, reflecting the collective sentiment against government's policies and leadership. However, the hashtag **#RutoMustgo** surfaced as an altered version, potentially aimed at mocking, or undermining the original movement's seriousness. This tactic highlighted the strategic use of social media to influence discourse, where subtle alterations in hashtags can affect public perception and debate dynamics, illustrating the nuanced strategies employed in digital activism.



The use of VPNs to bypass internet restrictions

In response to anticipated internet disruptions and potential government-imposed restrictions, X became a critical platform for disseminating information about the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Users shared guides and recommendations on how to install and use VPNs to maintain internet access and continue participating in protests. Prominent figures and activists, aware of the importance of uninterrupted communication, took to X to encourage their followers to download VPNs ahead of the planned demonstrations. Keywords such as **Tumi-eniVPN** and **DownloadVPN** trended as a result, with numerous posts linking to VPN software and tutorials. This proactive approach ensured that even if local internet service providers were compromised, protesters could still effectively coordinate and mobilise.



X users advocated VPN adoption amidst internet disruptions.

B. Facebook

Facebook Public Groups and use of AI generated content

Facebook was critical in mobilising masses during the anti-government protests in Kenya, leveraging both pages and public groups to amplify the movement's messages. Pages like this

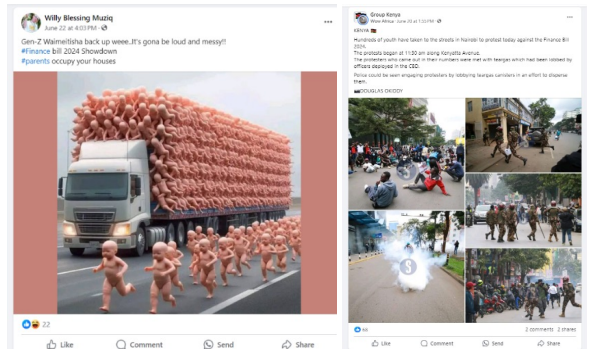
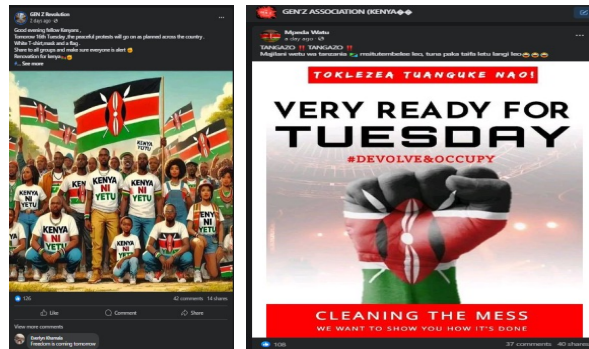
➤ GEN Z Revolution

(<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100077804072408>), boasting 8.2K followers, and

➤ GEN'Z ASSOCIATION (KENYA)

(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/734159565498553/>) with a membership of 61.5K,

served as hubs for sharing digital cards, updates, and posts under hashtags such as *#rutomustbestopped*, *#rutomustgo*, *#occupyCBD*, and *#youthsareawake*. These platforms facilitated widespread engagement through shares, comments, and reactions, effectively reaching a broad audience and mobilising support for the protests. By harnessing the interactive nature of Facebook, organisers were able to disseminate information, coordinate activities, and galvanise collective action among diverse segments of the population, marking Facebook as a crucial tool in the digital mobilisation efforts during this period of civil unrest.



Screenshots of mobilisation in public Facebook groups.

C. ZELLO

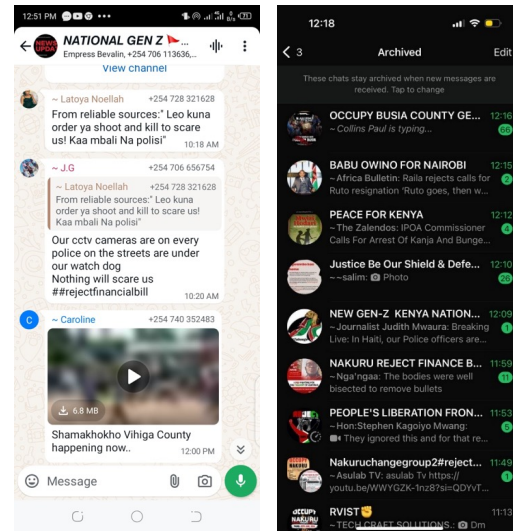
On 21 June 2024, the Gen Z population in Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD) and other parts of Kenya began utilising an app called Zello, which transforms a smartphone into a walkie-talkie radio capable of logging into a group call. This innovative use of Zello allowed protestors to form a network of interconnected devices, facilitating real-time, instant communication among large groups. The app's ability to create group channels enabled efficient coordination and rapid dissemination of information, proving invaluable for coordinating and responding swiftly to unfolding events. As internet restrictions and surveillance concerns grew, Zello's functionality became a critical tool for maintaining secure and reliable communication during the anti-government protests.

D. WhatsApp

Activists and mobilisers turned to WhatsApp as a pivotal platform for organising and mobilising participants. Initially, individuals formed WhatsApp groups to coordinate plans and share critical updates. Recognising the limitation of WhatsApp groups, which capped membership at 1,024 individuals, organisers quickly adopted WhatsApp Communities. This feature allowed administrators to branch out to up to fifty groups within a community, accommodating a substantial membership of up to 5,000 individuals.

Within these communities, participants shared essential details such as protest schedules, designated leaders to address crowds, strategies for peaceful demonstrations, rationale behind the protests, and instructions on how to participate effectively. This decentralised approach facilitated robust communication networks, ensuring

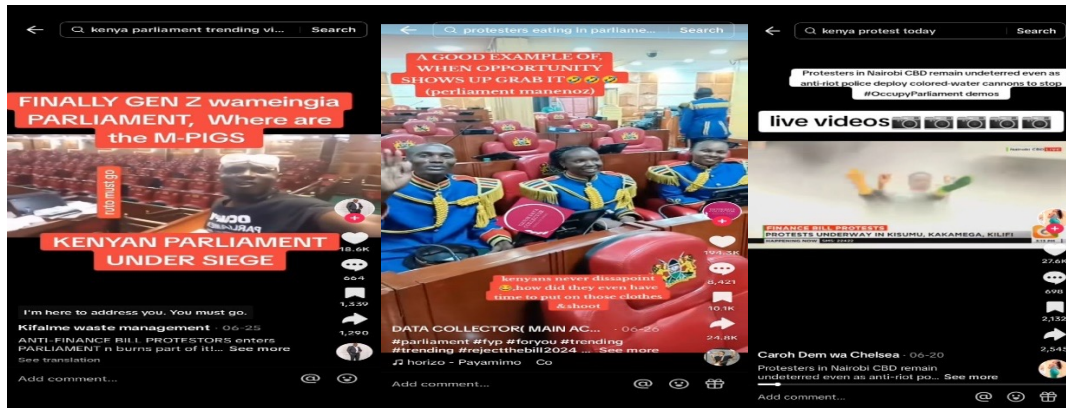
widespread participation, and coordinated action across different regions of the country.



Screenshot & screen record depicting WhatsApp groups and communities pivotal in coordinating Kenya's anti-government protests.

E. TikTok

During the anti-government protests across various counties in Kenya, young protestors utilised TikTok's live streaming feature to provide real-time coverage of events. Each protester streamed live from their individual TikTok accounts, highlighting the unfolding demonstrations as they happened. This direct and unfiltered approach allowed viewers to witness the protests firsthand, capturing authentic moments and actions taken by participants. The live broadcasts played a crucial role in motivating more individuals to join the protests, as viewers across different regions borrowed strategies and tactics observed from these live feeds. Importantly, TikTok's live coverage served as a counter to misinformation, presenting factual accounts of the protests without manipulation, thus bolstering transparency and credibility in the movement.



Screenshots illustrating the spread of protest progress on TikTok.

Postings, Reposting, and Analysis

TikTok became a vital platform for issuing updates and organising the demonstrations during the anti-government protests. The protesters shared detailed programme schedules and action plans through TikTok posts, ensuring that the participants were well informed and coordinated. The platform facilitated the rapid dissemination of posters, previous videos, and photos of ongoing and past protests, which were widely re-posted to mobilise support and participation for subsequent demonstrations. The media outlets also relied on TikTok content to analyse the protests in different counties, using videos, photos, and live coverage to provide information on the scale, impact, and dynamics of the demonstrations. This dual role of TikTok; both as a tool for organising and as a source of media analysis, underscored its significance in amplifying the voices and actions of protesters during this period of civil unrest.



https://www.tiktok.com/@mutembeitv/video/7384913412901358854?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7306125133483116038

Screenshots and links exemplifying mobilisation efforts.

Social media



Facebook



Instagram



WhatsApp



X



YouTube



Telegram



Gmail



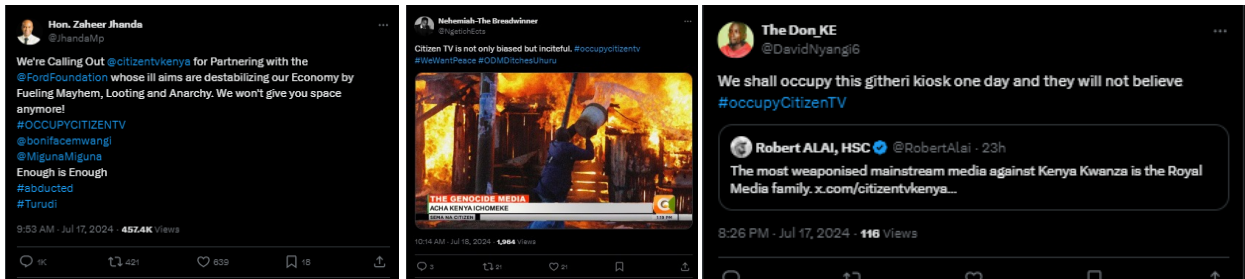
Bloggers' Campaign against **Mainstream Media**

After bloggers associated with the government, noted their inability to effectively counter the anti-government protests on social media platforms, they shifted their focus to campaigning against mainstream media outlets for providing coverage to the demos. This campaign included efforts to incite and smear mainstream media, accusing them of advocacy and fueling the protests. The bloggers used hashtags such as #occupycitizentv and #We-WantPeace to promote their narrative, with the goal to undermine the credibility of mainstream media coverage and influence public perception.

This tactic highlights a deliberate attempt to manipulate public opinion and regulatory responses, posing challenges to media ethics, freedom of expression, safety and protection of journalists. By targeting the mainstream media, these bloggers sought to divert attention from the core issues raised by the protesters and discredit legitimate journalistic coverage. Such actions underscore the complexities of regulating digital spaces and the importance of media literacy in discerning credible sources amidst online misinformation campaigns.



Screenshots: Tweets attacking mainstream media.



Social media



Facebook



Instagram



WhatsApp



X



YouTube



Telegram



TikTok



Snapchat



Gmail



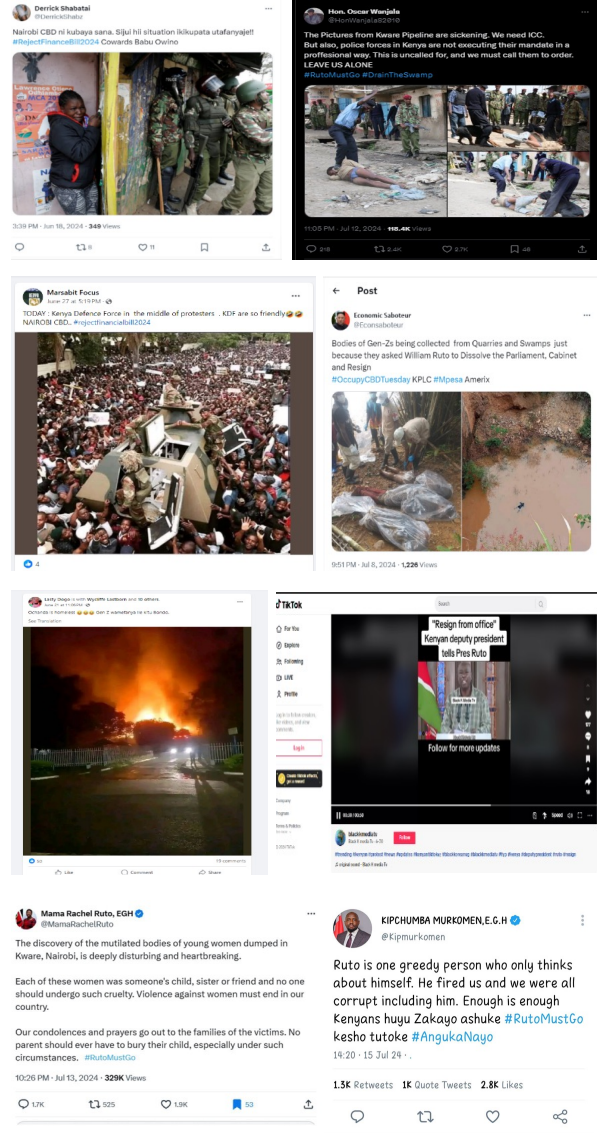
Hate Speech, Misinformation & Disinformation during the Demonstrations

During Kenya's anti-government protests, social media platforms became arenas for both agitation, mobilisation, and the spread of harmful content, including hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation. These elements played a divisive role in the discourse surrounding the demonstrations, influencing public opinion and potentially inciting unrest.

Hate Speech: One notable incident involved Dadaab Member of Parliament Farah Maalim, who made inflammatory remarks directed at Gen Z protestors. In a video circulating on social media, Maalim stated that he would have killed at least 5,000 Gen Zs if he were president. These remarks are highly contentious and are likely to provoke animosity and violence among people with differing political affiliations in the country.

➤ Link to Farah Maalim’s controversial remarks: [X link](<https://x.com/BaliJibril/status/1812917715461677549>)

Misinformation and Disinformation: Throughout the protests, misinformation and disinformation proliferated online, exacerbating tensions, and distorting public understanding. False claims about protest organisers, exaggerated reports of violence, and fabricated narratives aimed at discrediting the movement were widely circulated. Such misinformation not only misled the public but also posed risks to the safety and credibility of protestors, underscoring the challenges of navigating digital spaces amidst social and political upheaval.



Screenshots of misinformation / disinformation shared during Kenya’s anti-government protests.

Social media



Facebook



Instagram



WhatsApp



X



YouTube



Telegram



Gmail



Use of Artificial Intelligence Content

The integration of AI and digital tools marked a significant shift in political activism in Kenya, particularly among the Gen Z's. The approach not only facilitated immediate mobilisation but also contributed to a broader understanding of political issues, empowering citizens to demand accountability from their leaders. Protests ultimately pressured the government to reconsider some of the proposed tax measures, indicating the effectiveness of digital activism in shaping policy outcomes.

One such invention was the development of **corrupt politicians' GPT** chatbot. The bot had features that were designed to expose and inform users about corruption cases involving Kenyan politicians. The tool was designed to empower citizens to hold politicians accountable and promote transparency in governance, particularly during the ongoing protests in Kenya against government policies and corruption.

Conclusion

The online mobilisation of the anti-government protest in Kenya shows the powerful role of social media platforms, which contributed uniquely to the coordination, communication, and amplification of protest activities, reflecting a multifaceted approach to digital activism.

From real-time coordination to live coverage and strategic discourse, these tools enabled protestors to organise effectively and spread critical information widely.

However, this digital mobilisation also brought to light significant challenges. The prevalence of hate speech, harmful content, misinformation and ideological conflicts online often led to divisive interactions, undermining the focus of the protesters. Furthermore, increased surveillance raised questions about freedom of expression and the ethical implications of monitoring citizens' online activities. These concerns underscore the need for a balanced and responsible use of social networks, ensuring that it serves as a platform for constructive dialogue and genuine change rather than a battleground for ideological conflicts and misinformation.

As Kenya continues to navigate its political landscape, the lessons learnt from these protests highlight the potential of digital

tools to shape public discourse and drive social movements.

However, it also emphasises the importance of fostering a respectful and open online environment where diverse perspectives can coexist without descending into hostility and censorship. The experiences from this period will undoubtedly inform future strategies for both activists and policy makers in leveraging technology for social and political change.

Recommendations

- Need to relook at the regulatory regimes in the country in the face of increasing use of digital space for communication outside the normative codes guiding information exchange.
- Need to develop media and digital literacy frameworks that will ensure responsible use and consumption of media content.
- Active engagement between content regulators and digital platform providers to ensure responsible measures for content regulation while safeguarding freedom of expression.

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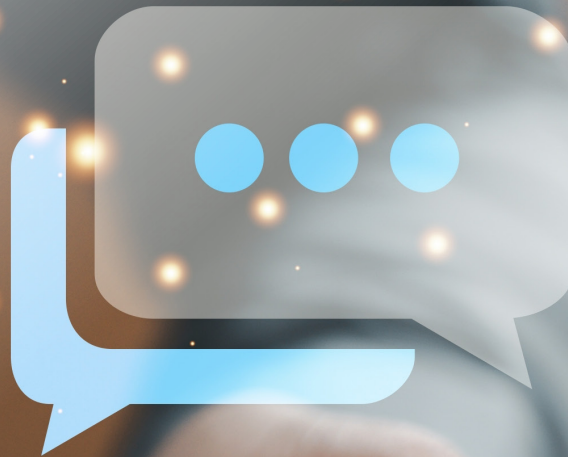
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