

Decoding Political Discourse on Digital Platforms in Africa: Rumour Networks among Rural Populace in Kenya's 2022 Elections

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Abstract

Rumour, a basic feature of rural livelihoods, has often been utilised to dispel fears and elaborate events deemed complicated. As ordinary people continue to adopt digital platforms to engage with the state and markets, rumours prominently feature on digital platforms, thus becoming definitive agents for political and social change. This study provides an in-depth analysis of how rumour was leveraged as a tool for political messaging on digital platforms in rural Kenya during the 2022 general elections. We argue that political actors made normative policy claims that were weaponised by the two dominant coalitions' supporters at the grassroots level through dynamic networks that spread campaign information. The weaponisation of policy statements transformed normative claims into age-old rumours that have aided political discourse in contemporary Kenya. As the rumours spread, the networks informed the recipient of political messages and their popularity. To build this thesis, this study uses empirical evidence gathered through fieldwork in an ethnography of the residents of rural central Kenya. We use social network analysis (SNA) to analyse the subject matter by picking key spreaders of information on digital platforms to show the networks on which they relied to spread their information.

Keywords: Kenya's 2022 elections, digital platforms, rumours, rural populace, social networks

1. Introduction

The appearance of ordinary people's stories on media platforms is common in Kenya's media history. Since the liberalisation of the airwaves in the late 1990s¹, there has been a proliferation of programmes that emphasise the plight of ordinary people on the airwaves². To their listeners, these stories are sometimes breath-taking, especially because they can easily fall into the 'private' category. However, the storytellers are often willing to sacrifice their privacy for the favours (either fiscal or award of opportunities) they gain from the listeners from telling their stories. There are interesting parallels, in terms of what a storyteller gains, between radio-based stories and how stories are dispensed on the emerging digital media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. For the purpose of our present interest, the loci of the storytelling in digital spaces are to establish the 'truth' of a specified matter, exploit the digital media's capacity to reach a large commune, solicit help from newly found commune/expatriate agencies, and re-affirm the 'controversial' lifestyles adopted by certain members of society. We see these loci as catalysts for the proliferation of storytelling in digital spaces by the ordinary masses in rural Kenya.

The prominence of these stories thrives on rural people's pre-existing desires to feature on radio and have their own stories heard through that medium. This desire has been a theatre for proving what is true and how that truth is gauged or measured, with stories that appear on media platforms seen as authentic, appealing, beyond reproach, and truthful. Because not all people have been fortunate to have their stories featured on media platforms, two key strands have emerged: On the one hand, Kenyans have solicited means to dispute some of the media-led discourses. To dispute prominent discourses on the conventional media, rumour has been the key tool that has been adopted by the rural populace to create alternative narratives and discourses that aid them in especially making sense of what they may regard as misleading political discourse promoted by the media. On the other hand, especially with the rise of various digital platforms, 'all stories' seem to matter. Therefore, the truth does not exclusively hinge on the appearance of the stories on the media because the emergence and prominence of the use of smart phones has advertently affected the influence of radio and television as most rural residents turn to digital spaces as alternatives. This attitude seems to be re-inventing the place of rumour in the

¹ In the period from 1990 to 2000, Kenya's state-owned station, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), predominantly controlled the national media landscape. The introduction of the 1998 telecommunications policy and law allowed the privatisation and liberalisation of the telecommunication sector (EPZ and International Research Network 2005). This led to a proliferation of vernacular stations across Kenya. By the year 2010, there were 372 FM frequencies that had been allocated to radio stations. From these, 233 were active and 139 dormant. Similarly, there were 109 television frequencies issued by the regulatory authorities, of which 71 were active and 38 dormant (see Githaiga 2013).

² Examples of such programmes are Kameme FM's *muiguithania* (reconciler, and Milele FM's *patanisho* (bringing together) breakfast radio shows. These stories are used by media houses as bait to expand their listeners' bases. One of their main characteristics is that people seem to participate in them through phone calls, as if they were in a therapy session or seeking solutions to their own private or family-based issues. Examples of such stories include a man complaining on Radio Jambo by Maina 2022 that his wife does not cook for him. <<https://radiojambo.co.ke/vipindi/patanisho/2022-08-03-patanisho-tunalala-kama-kondoo-jamaa-amlalamikia-mkewe-kwa-kutompikia-omena/>, Accessed on 4 September 2022>

society. In an election season, which is the focus of the present study, the number of stories that are told increases. Again, the capacitation of these stories to spread faster via digital spaces has meant that ‘truth’ is more diverse. Therefore, since an electoral season also demands the absorption and dispersion of vast pieces of information, the spread of rumours in electoral seasons has increased.

Before the spread of vernacular media (radio, to be specific), which widened the participation of local discourses and livelihoods, the attempts to establish the ‘truth’ of a matter was not entirely absent. A highly secretive *serikali* (state)³ often forced ordinary people to seek alternatives to explain issues that they felt were not fathomable based on the official state discourse. Musila (2015) has offered examples such as politically motivated assassinations during the reigns of Presidents Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi. As a highly guarded secret, explanations of political assassinations did not make sense to ordinary Kenyans, who sought alternative sources to account for them in their own versions. Alternative accounts appeared in ‘gossip’ printed on the grapevine because the state media⁴ were highly controlled. Therefore, the liberalisation of the airwaves in the late 1990s opened up the space for alternative political discourse. The various media-related reforms after the fall of President Moi’s dictatorial regime precipitated changes that have complicated political discourse in the media spaces. These reforms, which resulted from disruptive technologies (Arthur *et al.* 2020), included the mobile money revolution called M-Pesa in 2007 and emergence of digital democracy⁵. These reforms not only complicated the nature of political discourse, but their increased adoption also complicated media ownership, which brought new actors into media spaces. To an extent, our present inquiry concerns the question of the identity of the actors on these new platforms. We propose that one way to approach this question is through investigating rumour as an agency for understanding political discourse in Kenya’s contemporary political history as practised in digital spaces.

Rumour, although rarely discussed, has been central to political discourse in Kenya’s contemporary political history (Musila 2015). The uses of rumour in political discourse have been diverse, ranging from critical issues of national concern to political competition. The 2013 and 2017 presidential campaigns by President Uhuru Kenyatta heavily relied on rumours fashioned against the key opposition leader, Raila Odinga, to mobilise voters. Key among these rumours were that Raila facilitated the persecution of the two leading candidates in 2013 that led to their implication with the accusations of crimes against humanity at the international criminal court (ICC)⁶. Others that spilt over into 2017 and

³ The local reference to the state in Swahili is *Serikali*; however, locals may twist this and replace the ‘e’ with an ‘i’, so that it reads as a highly secretive organisation, that is, combining *siri* (secret) and *kali* (high level).

⁴ Before the liberalisation of airwaves, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation dominated both television and radio networks in English, Swahili, and select local languages (see Githaiga 2013).

⁵ For studies exploring the nexus between mobile money revolutionary usage and digital democracy, see Cheeseman *et al.* (2018), Nyabola (2018), Maurer (2012a; 2012b).

⁶ An account of Kenya’s 2007 elections and the conflict in the aftermath that led to ICC cases was reported by Verini J. 2016 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/magazine/international-criminal-court-moreno-ocampo-the-prosecutor-and-the-president.html>, Accessed on 8 August 2022>

2022 painted Raila as a *mganga* (literally meaning a traditional healer, but used in this context to mean a witchdoctor or an anti-Christ in a Christian worldview). In 2017, the Jubilee campaign also capitalised on Raila as ‘uncircumcised’, a rite of passage that is pertinent to the Gikuyu norms for ascending into leadership roles⁷. Although the former two sets of rumours were targeted at a nation-wide audience, the latter was notoriously amplified in the central Kenya region as it resonated with the cultural expressions of the Agikuyu.

In 2018, the fall out between Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy, now President William Ruto, precipitated ‘handshake’ politics where informal agreement was reached to pave a way for Kenyatta to support Raila in the 2022 general elections. Thus, one of Kenyatta’s main tasks was to undo the damage caused over the years to the person of Raila as a presidential candidate and re-shape ‘Railaphobia’ in central Kenya. Kenyatta’s supporters in central Kenya seemed to understand well the magnitude of the effects of previous rumours about Raila on the central Kenya region, openly confessing that ‘we [sold] rumours about him, and we will now embark on telling the people that we lied to them to win elections’⁸. This has proven to be a difficult task for the political class in the 2022 elections as the opposing side (Kenya Kwanza coalition) took advantage of the pre-existing ‘Railaphobia’ in central Kenya to mobilise support for Ruto’s presidency, bringing about a political contest that has further complicated what many have historically described as an ‘ethnic’ mobilisation of votes⁹. As Nyabola (2018) rightly claims, online politics is usually a reflection of plug-off realities; the unfounded fears used in the previous elections in central Kenya to reject Raila’s candidature were viciously used on the ground. The digital spaces amplified these realities by spreading the same fears to both on the ground and online audiences, at times leading to fierce exchanges in these spaces.

The ‘handshake’ politics had an enormous impact on different social media platforms as ‘keyboard warriors’, largely also referred to as ‘bloggers’ in the local setting¹⁰, crafted messaging about the two

⁷ Uhuru Kenyatta was quoted by KTN News on 5 November 2015 as stating that the Gikuyu community could not elect a *kihii* (uncircumcised) as a president. See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJPOzxrTXKY>, Accessed on 29 August 2022>. These same sentiments were repeated by Moses Kuria, the party leader of *Chama cha Kazi* (loosely translated as workers party) during the August 2022 campaign. Circumcision is an important rite of passage among the central Kenyan communities as it is regarded as a key component to qualify for leadership.

⁸ These sentiments are associated with Uhuru Kenyatta’s two key supporters in his bid to support Raila Odinga’s campaign for presidency in 2022: former Starehe M.P., Maina Kamanda, and the Jubilee Party chairperson, Mr David Murathe.

⁹ Ethnic mobilisation in Kenya has widely been studied as a phenomenon whereby ethnic groups in Kenya rally behind their own to negotiate for power (see Lynch 2015, Bates 1974, Cohen 1993, Gellner 2006). In 2022, this strategy was overturned as Ruto rallied the Gikuyu community against their own kingpin, Uhuru Kenyatta, who opted to support the long-time opposition leader, Raila Odinga. Ruto variously used the pre-existing fears from Raila’s presidency that were dominant among the Gikuyu and new strategies that capitalised on Uhuru’s shortcomings while in power by placing himself as an outsider, although he served a complete term as a deputy president.

¹⁰ This study uses ‘keyboard warriors’ and ‘bloggers’ interchangeably. These two terms refer to active individuals on social media platforms who seem to be replacing the classic patron-client roles in Kenya’s political competition. In Kenya, classical patronism used tribal kingpins as representatives of a constituency while promising rewards to powerful individuals who manipulated the voting bloc (Berman *et. al.* 2009). In digital spaces, keyboard warriors have been replacing the classic patrons speaking on their behalf. The keyboard warriors are vibrant people committed to creating content with an intent to manipulate votes in a given constituency. The keyboard warriors have been conducting their carefully strategised campaign with eyes on reward from politicians, and therefore their influence cannot be interpreted as representative of the aspirations of the ordinary people.

candidates at the frontline of political competition, some of whom were strong antagonists of these candidates. Key ‘bloggers’ included Dennis Itumbi for Ruto and Pauline Njoroge, a former anti-Raila campaigner-turned-key ally due to her connections with Kenyatta. These two ‘bloggers’ and others like them informed the discourse that characterised the 9 August 2022 election and official campaign period that started from 29 May 2022 to 6 August 2022. The debates about the elections and candidates were highly characterised by rumours and sentiments authored by ‘keyboard warriors’, that were aided, to spread like bushfire through the digital platforms. Using this context, this study seeks to analyse the kind of networks that such rumours shaped and utilised to facilitate the spread of political messaging in Kenya’s 2022 electoral competition on digital platforms, focusing mainly on Facebook and WhatsApp as channels of distribution.

We explore rumour as a tool for political messaging in the 2022 elections by using research methods in social network analysis (SNA) combined with ethnographic data collected in two counties of central Kenya (Embu and Kirinyaga) during the official campaign period (29 May to 6 August 2022). We aim to analyse the kind of networks that spreaders of rumours exploited to succeed in political messaging. Embu and Kirinyaga are adjacent, and are among the larger central Kenyan counties. Kirinyaga’s total population is 610,411, whereas Embu’s is 608,599, according to the 2019 census (KNBS 2020). The residents of these two counties rely on agriculture for daily survival. They also engage in small-sized businesses to complement their incomes from the farms. These two counties’ landscapes cover both arid and semi-arid areas, and many areas have emerged as urban spaces hosting a significant number of literate youths.

The paper is organised as follows: First, we begin by clarifying the terms and theoretical underpinnings of this study, and discuss how rumours were used in the 2022 political competition. We then explore the methodology adopted in the study, the final part of which section provides a description of the four strands of rumours that we used as empirical examples for this study. In the discussion section, we show the networks that rumours formed and exploited as they spread, before explaining their outcome and purpose. We then discuss our findings, and conclude with a discussion of the usability of similar studies and their centrality and potential to advance democratic progress in sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Definitions and theoretical underpinnings

The communities in this study are predominantly from central Kenya, and use Gikuyu, English, and Swahili languages to communicate in day-to-day conversations. This defines the choice of the concept of this study, which uses both rumours and gossip as connoting a singular meaning. In Gikuyu, rumour and gossip are best described by the word, *muchene*, connoting any kind of recent, unverified news or information about someone known to a subject. Similar to the views and claims of sociologists and psychologists (Bloom 2004, Dunbar 2004, Gluckman 1963, Foster 2004), *muchene* in the central Kenya

setting is not necessarily about falsehood. Just as Shibutani (1966) claims that the character of rumour is defined by the intensity with which it spreads, so it is with *muchene*. Depending on who tells *muchene*, the more widespread and widely told, the more plausible it becomes. The mediators of *muchene* are often women, who operate in a setting that is usually enabled by traditional networks of social gatherings. These social gatherings have been complicated by the emergence of digital spaces that have become pertinent to rural people's daily lives. The rumours analysed here thus feature on Facebook pages and WhatsApp as topics about other people or institutions packaged as narratives to mobilise for political victory. However, they are also stories with unverified 'truths' when they mention or imply specific people or institutions.

Although *muchene* is ubiquitous across the livelihoods of the central Kenyan communities, there has hardly been a systematic study that has focused on *muchene* in both cultural and political life. This is prevalent even though the mushrooming and ease of access to digital platforms has mediated a wide-ranging feature of rumour and gossip among the Kenyan public. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature stream that views peripheral communities as key to political discourse through a discussion of the networks of rumours that aid political decision making for the ordinary people. In his canonical studies, Scott (1985) notes that gossip is never 'disinterested' when made available in the social realm. He asserts that 'it is a partisan effort (by class, faction, or family) to advance its claims and interests against those of others' (Scott 1985: 282). As a 'partisan effort', gossip and rumours can serve an emancipatory purpose when used by the subaltern as a form of resistance seeking inclusion into hegemonic public discourse. This is achieved by allowing the emergence of subversive, alternative, and insurgent counter publics. As a form of resistance, 'gossip is a kind of democratic voice in conditions where power and possible regression make open acts of disrespect dangerous' (Scott 1985: 282). For the ordinary masses in Kenya, however, during the critical season when people are required to decide on whom to vote for, this Scotian view remains elusive. This is despite a candid discussion of its applicability in the Kenyan context by Musila (2015), who sees the possibility of rumours as a weapon of the weak against an all-powerful state. We take steps to complement Musila's (2015) work in this study by underscoring that, compared to the malicious gossip or character assassination used in hegemonic political structures, gossip and rumour in rural central Kenya do not necessarily frame or discredit an individual's reputation with a repressive disciplinary intent. Rather, they are broad and inherently ambiguous.

Following the insights from Musila's work, efforts that aim to analyse how rumours and gossip are used on digital platforms among the rural communities of Kenya are not only necessary, but are also important tools to unlock the complexities of expressing African rural livelihoods. We extend this analysis by underscoring how mushrooming digital platforms have given rumours and gossip a context to thrive, thus becoming relevant as a tool for asserting rights, claiming those rights, and political

contestation. This is as a result of these digital platforms' influence on rumours. Thus, the larger and unintended consequence of the rumours and gossip featuring on digital platforms has been that rural communities are being creative with the avenues of leveraging digital platforms beyond traditional purposes to seek interaction with the ordinary people and the state.

3. Methods in SNA

To understand the kinds of social networks that were created by rumours and what made them thrive in rural central Kenya, facilitated by digital platforms, SNA is applied to unravel how the networks of rumours were structured and used. We collected data on more than 100 participants from two neighbouring counties: Embu and Kirinyaga. Although the participants came from a rural area, they were identified as being familiar with urban life. We clustered the survey responses based on four key narratives that were popularised through Facebook and WhatsApp posts during the official campaign period in Kenya's 2022 general election. The author created the networks that formed around these discourses as the news spread. These narratives appeared at different intervals from the moment when they were kick-started by either the presidential candidates from the two leading opposite camps or significant actors during the campaigns. The narratives usually formed when the topics were at their peaks and, notably, the news peaked within a few days after embarkment. Using the four discourses, we targeted a maximum of approximately 50 people for each discourse to establish where they had obtained their sources of information. For analysis, we focused on participants whose mutual mentions exceeded two¹¹. Each network was created in its own specific location in the area of research; thus, the participants were well familiar with one another. The study was conducted in the towns of Kirinyaga, Manyatta, Runyenjes, and Kirimari in Embu and Kirinyaga counties, among residents who were small-scale farmers and business vendors, young people in colleges and universities, and those in waged labour.

A network contains a collection of actors, such as individuals, groups, and organisations, who are represented as nodes in SNA, identified here as sets of rumour spreaders and ties between them (Wasserman and Faust 1994). In this study, ties are flows of information to the grassroots populace. The respondents are represented by nodes with two sets: men by circles and women by triangles. Among the nodes, both men and women who are referred to as 'keyboard warriors' appear as important central individuals in the social networks that were created. Centrality measurements in networks describe the levels of sending and receiving in relationships in which PageRank is used for measurement (see Gould 1987, Newman 2010). Central nodes mean that they have more ties to other nodes (Brin and Page 1998) thus revealing which individuals are critical as sources of information (Wasserman and Faust 1994,

¹¹ To maintain and satisfy the target for the number of participants, the sociogram included some nodes that did not have mutual mentions, such as Watugi, Njogu, and Wanyaga in Figure 1, among others. However, the analyses depended only on the participants with mutual mentions, and their inclusion did not affect the overall structure of the sociogram.

Newman 2010, Prell 2011) and trust as they structure the networks. Central women are represented by diamonds, whereas hexagons represent central men. An arrow that connects nodes indicates the direction from the source of information. Some respondents claimed to have received news from two sources, and these are shown as bi-directional. Respondents who claimed to have had deeper prior knowledge of and relationships with one another, among whom it was therefore easy to trust information that was passed on, are represented in the same colour. As this question was followed by one on the kind of relationship that the participants had (the answer was usually based on the kind of relationship they had), thick margins denote seniority in age, medium margins denote a common understanding based on social status, and thin ones denote a junior status or no relationship at all. Using the participants' responses, we identified ties that showed the sources of information on the rumours that they spread (based on specified topics) or held onto during the campaigning period. For those who could, we asked them to identify the 'blogger' from whom the information originated. The outcome is illustrated in sociograms 1, 2, 3, and 4, based on the responses in the networks created by the respondents. These networks are connected by dense ties based on rural people's livelihoods, family ties, neighbourliness, or friendships (see Table 1).

Table 1: Relationships between rumour spreaders and receivers in the social-network graph for the sociogram in Figure 1

| No. | Relationship between the rumour spreaders and receivers | Number of ties in the social-network graph |
|-----|---|--|
| 1 | Women group | 42 |
| 2 | Church group | 54 |
| 3 | Campaign team | 28 |
| 4 | <i>Nyumba kumi</i> (Ten-fold households) ¹² | 22 |
| 5 | Table banking | 18 |
| 6 | School/ work colleague | 9 |
| 7 | Others | 72 |
| | Total | 245 |

Created by the author.

During the official campaign period (29 May 2022 to 6 August 2022), we created a social network survey using four key topics as they gained prominence towards the election date. From 29 May 2022 to early July, these conversations were tracked online. From 19 July 2022, the interviews were conducted mainly in person with the local people of the two counties in rural central Kenya that were selected for this study, which included participatory observations during travel trips to various parts of the counties.

¹² *Nyumba kumi* (literally translated as 'ten-fold') is a state-led informal stratification of neighbours into small groups of ten households. It was initiated in the aftermath of the several cases of insecurity and terror attacks in 2013. Therefore, the main purpose of this initiative was to improve security by incorporating neighbours to survey on each other. *Nyumba kumi* strategises on concepts of communal livelihoods that have thrived in Africa, such as Ubuntu, Harambee, and Ujamaa. For additional studies on these concepts, see Kioko (2017), Mark (2017), and Muchangi (2016).

The four rumours selected for this study are an intriguing representation of how information and misinformation spread, forming specific networks in rural Kenya during the elections.

The four narratives were chosen based on their uniqueness in terms of the target and categories of the stories in which people engaged. Furthermore, they seemed effective in an election season. Thus, in themselves, the narratives were considered relevant and significant by the respondents. The responses were used to profile networks based on the four rumours. The responses to the set questions depended entirely on the interviewees' judgements of who the sources were. We then conducted an ethnographic survey using a select few. The narratives from our respondents appeared to form intersections that helped us decipher how the participants in these channels related to one another and the perceived sources of information. In each case, we tried to verify the connections as much as possible by establishing the relationships between the participants and those that they mentioned. The four networks that were created based on the select participants' responses might not necessarily have been representative of the thousands of other similar activities that have emerged on digital platforms in Kenya. Nevertheless, they provided a solid examination of the aspects of the networks created through the peoples' transfer of stories among one another on the digital platforms.

4. The four campaign items: from normative policy statements to campaign rumours

During campaigns, political aspirants are keen to articulate their intended policies to enhance people's livelihoods. This 'issue-based approach' to politics was amplified during the 2022 elections, when political mobilisation in Kenya was seen to be shifting from the client-patron ethnic-based strategies (see Kanyiga *et al.* 2022, Cheeseman 2022). The 2022 political mobilisation was particularly unique as the candidates made economy and gender the main issues of their campaigns. There were four contestants who were cleared to run by the national independent electoral commission (IEBC). Nevertheless, only two camps had a nation-wide appeal. The Azimio la Umoja One Kenya coalition (henceforth referred to as Azimio), led by Raila Odinga, radically committed to the gender agenda by appointing Martha Karua, a prominent human rights activist, as the running mate. The Kenya Kwanza coalition, led by William Ruto, manifested itself as an anti-establishment coalition championing the plight of those at the bottom of the pyramid with a 'hustler nation' rallying call that popularised the 'bottom up' economic approach. The seriousness of these issues was evident as each group countered the other with almost equal strategies. For instance, the Kenya Kwanza coalition offered to fill half of the cabinet positions with women, while Azimio offered the 'one county one product industrialisation plan'. Despite these being core issues, the usual, ugly, name-calling, propaganda-based mobilisation also thrived in equal measures. We chose some of these schemes and classified them as rumours.

The first set of rumours that we used claimed that Raila had purported to say that '*mitumba ni nguo*

za maiti’ (second-hand clothes are for the dead). In what was largely considered as a slip of the tongue or misrepresentation of what the Azimio candidate meant during his manifesto launch on 7 June 2022, depending on which side of the coalition one enquired from, Raila, while outlining his policy to revamp the once lucrative local textile industry, alluded that the potential of Kenyan own-made textiles was inhibited by Kenya’s continued importation of *mitumba* (second-hand) clothes. Millions of Kenyans depend on cheap, second-hand clothes imported into the country from the major developed countries. Raila’s statement therefore became an easy tool to market his opponent’s rhetoric of ‘bottom up’ economic model that had, since the start of the campaigns, been appealing to those at the bottom of the pyramid. News spread rapidly, with the political class ridiculing Raila as being out of touch with the lives of the ordinary people. Those opposed to Raila’s candidature capitalised on the news castigating Raila’s stance as insensitive. Politicians went to Gikomba, the biggest second-hand shopping centre in Nairobi, to show solidarity with the *mitumba* businesses vendors. Having spent thousands of shillings buying goods from poor traders, they ensured that the message made it to the top of the news articles using a hashtag, *’nguo za maiti*’¹³. As the political class went shopping in shanty kiosks around the city to show solidarity with the downtrodden, the messages about Raila’s utterances about *mitumba* clothes spread like a bushfire in digital spaces, while those in the village received the message from those around them and the networks they had built over the years¹⁴.

¹³ See the British Broadcasting Cooperation’s (BBC’s) Swahili story on this issue on 8 June 2022, available at <<https://www.bbc.com/swahili/habari-61730561>, Accessed on 9 August 2022>.

¹⁴ Interview with Kimani Ndegwa, a *Nyumba Kumi* (tenfold) leader, at Manyatta on 10 June 2022, who narrated how his people became restless about Raila’s statement on *mitumba*, asserting that *’huyu mzee kweli hajui shinda za mahustlers*’ (this old man does not actually understand hustlers’ struggles).

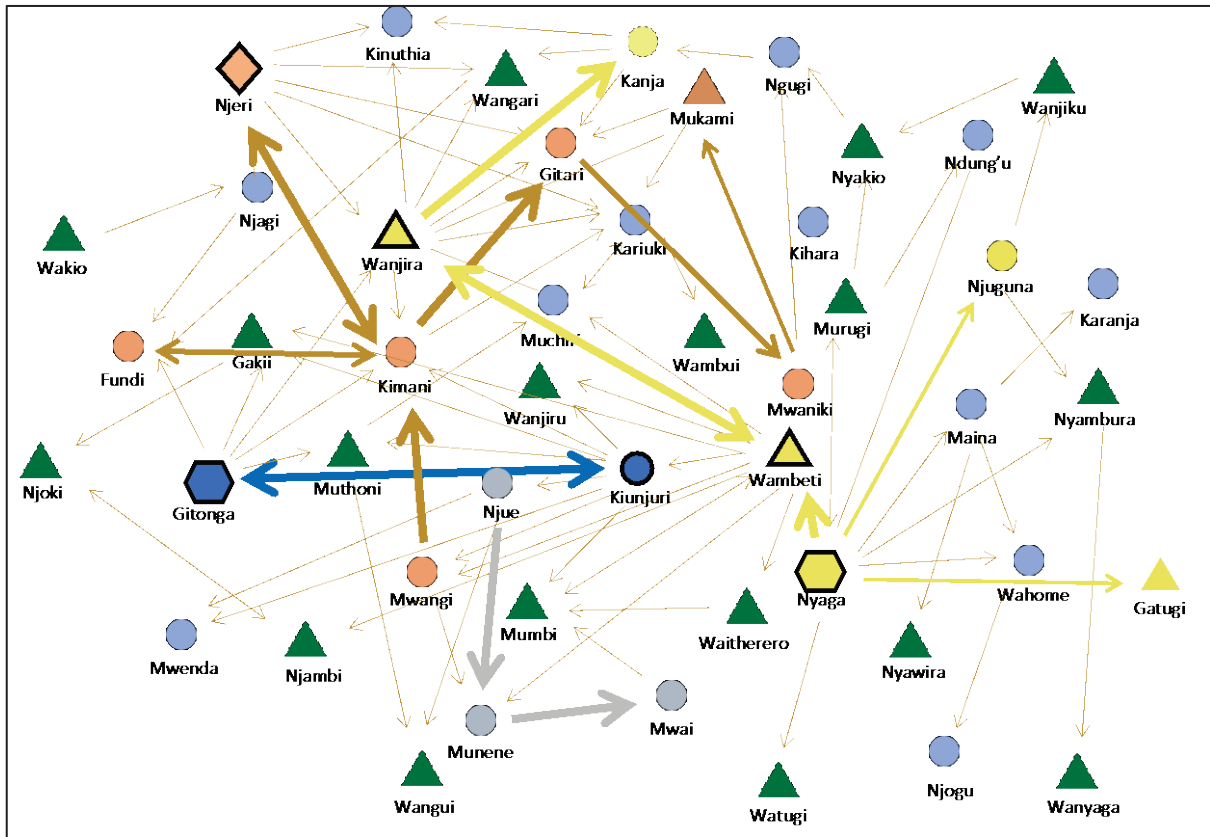


Figure 1: Raila's administration will ban the importation of second-hand clothes. Digital spaces network – created by the author.

This sociogram was drawn based on the 'nguo za mitumba' rumour that started to spread on 7 June 2022. It is centred on Njeri¹⁵, a 42-year-old blogger, who passes her messaging on Facebook and frequently visits the plug-off spaces on the ground. Wanjira is a leader of several chama (see definition in section 6) that meet on weekly and monthly rotations. She is active in digital spaces, and thus uses her time in chama to pass on news that spread in the digital spaces. Before the start of the chama activities during the slated meeting days, as many participants are usually late and there are no strict measures against time keeping, Wanjira would use the time to discuss current events on the campaign trails. Wanjira mostly claimed to rely on Wambeti, who described herself as a blogger and was active on Facebook and WhatsApp. Wambeti carefully managed to craft success on the mostly male-dominated campaign teams. She relied on the local representatives' inner circles to convey campaign messages as part of the presidential campaign team at the local level. The other two influential nodes were Nyaga and Gitonga, whose target audiences were mostly in digital spaces.

¹⁵ All the names used here are pseudonyms derived from the local naming patterns of the Kirinyaga and Embu communities representing the participants.

On Sunday evening, 24 July 2022, local daily newspapers reported that at least 30 people had been killed in a grisly road accident when a bus travelling from Meru to Mombasa swerved off the notorious killer Nithi Bridge black spot¹⁶. The accident was said to have been caused by brake failure that had caused the driver to fail to control the bus at the sharp corner near the bridge. Several similar accidents have happened on the same spot in the past, eventually causing it to be assigned the ‘black spot’ status and leading to various people’s uproar urging the government to change the design of the bridge¹⁷. Thus, Nithi bridge has carried the gory stories of horrific accidents for many years, such as one that occurred in 2000, killing 45 people¹⁸. A day before the fateful accident, the Azimio presidential candidate had just departed from Meru, a town near the scene of accident. As absurd as it may sound, rumours spread in plug-off spaces asserting that Raila had ‘killed’ the passengers¹⁹. These sentiments were shared in the online spaces but seemed to be prevalent in the plug-off spaces. Those who shared, however, were at a loss to explain what informed that kind of conclusion²⁰.

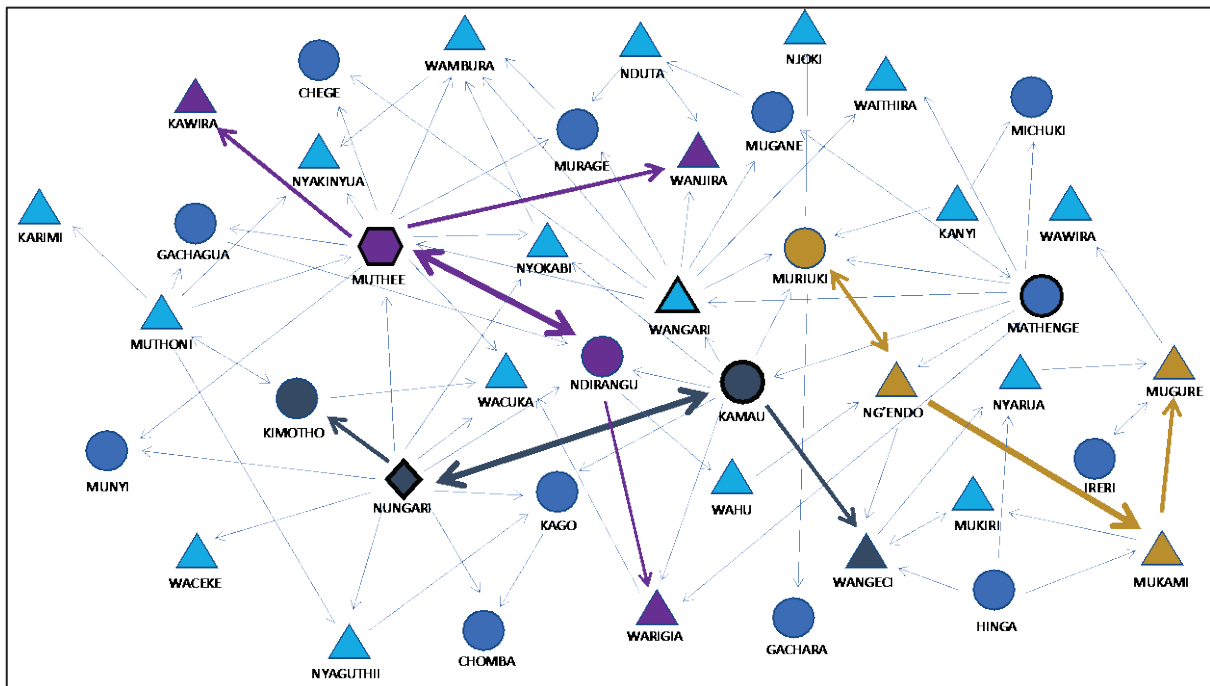


Figure 2: Nithi bridge accident. Digital and plug-off spaces network – created by the author.

¹⁶ See the news report by the EastAfrican on 25 July 2022 on <<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/34-dead-as-kenya-bus-plunges-into-river-3891456>, Accessed on 25 August 2022>.

¹⁷ The two leading candidates also committed to redesign the bridge if they took over power. See the story appearing on the Star on 26 July 2022 on <<https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2022-07-26-i-will-re-build-nithi-bridge-once-elected-raila/>, Accessed on 27 August 2022>.

¹⁸ See the news item by F. Naliaka on Citizen digital on 25 July 2022 at <<https://www.citizen.digital/news/the-history-of-killer-nithi-bridge-n302800>, Accessed on 1 September 2022>.

¹⁹ While on board the matatu to Embu town, a candid conversation started about the accident. A middle-aged woman, without mincing her words, blamed Raila for the accident, asserting that ‘yule mganga akikuja huku lazima kitu mbaya ifanyike’ (whenever that ‘witch’ comes over here, something terrible is bound to happen; he is a bad omen).

²⁰ For this particular rumour, due to its bizarre character, I conducted several face-to-face conversations with those behind it. There was no coherent explanation for their convictions and utterances besides that they portrayed a hatred for Raila.

Following the news of the Nithi bridge accident, rumours raged in plug-off spaces attempting to explain what had happened. This sociogram was drawn from a matatu (public van) conversation started off by Muthee, who seemed to closely agree with Nungari. We identified several passengers in the matatu; however, there were other names that emerged from people who did not travel in the same matatu. The rest of the nodes represent responses of people who were fairly familiar with one another as they travelled in the same matatu en route to the Kianjokoma location of Embu County. Matatu is a public space that offers a platform for random conversations that need no substantiation. The passengers share stories during the journey, although these stories may persist beyond the journey. Gachara, Michuki, Kawira, and Karimi are among the nodes that received the news a few days after the matatu conversation, from such nodes as Muriuki, Mathenge, Muthee, and Muthoni, who engaged in the conversation inside the matatu. The number of nodes that claimed to have news sources from digital spaces was limited, due to the choice of participants in the matatu; however, Mukami claimed to have obtained her news from a Facebook page that she did not identify.

Around 28 July 2022, a short clip of Raila Odinga making a statement about his possible approach to mitigating the religious divide between Christians and Muslims, mostly by according favours to often marginalised Muslims while seeking state services, started to trend in various digital spaces. In the video, Raila states that he will address the historical favouritism towards Christians over all other religious groups in Kenya when he ascends to the presidency. In an election period during which one of the major coalitions had made religion a key mobilising factor²¹, religious leaders and followers did not take the sentiments lightly. John W. Nguuh stated, ‘this is a call for spiritual warfare and action for every serious Christian. As much as Kenya is a secular state, trying to equate Christianity with other religions will be a major setback to evangelism, church planting, and discipleship. A serious impediment to the fulfilment of great commission. This statement is based on communism. So, help us LORD²²’. Those disappointed by Raila’s comment also pointed to similarities between his sentiments and those of his wife, Ida Odinga, which she had raised three months earlier. Ida Odinga had suggested that the mushrooming of small churches with little or no theological foundations needed to be stemmed or regulated²³. Thus, many anti-Raila followers were convinced that his candidature was against the church. Despite efforts by Raila to clarify his stance, it was too late as the message had spread like a wildfire on the social media and in the villages, claiming that Raila was an anti-church candidate, and that any sober Christian should not vote

²¹ The Kenya Kwanza coalition presented itself as pious, religiously committed leaders who often offered themselves to be prayed for in public rallies.

²² Facebook post by John Wesley Nguuh, an Evangelical pastor and leader in Nairobi church on 28 July 2022, <<https://www.facebook.com/john.nguuh/posts/pfbid036QgyVgJWW2HukjXSkWS7SsajXUvFYMUJ7ThQFr1U nmxomg4eQpqZRGsuYUbmGJZrl>, Accessed on 1 August 2022>.

²³ On 30 January 2022, Ida Odinga called on the National Council of Churches (NCCK) to regulate churches by abolishing mushrooming, small churches and to focus on training church leaders to ensure that quality sermons in the churches were the standard. She later apologised and withdrew the comments after a public uproar. See the news on 31 January 2022 from Tuko at <<https://www.tuko.co.ke/kenya/441786-ida-odinga-apologises-withdraws-remarks-church-regulation-i-meant-no-harm/>, Accessed on 22 August 2022>.

for him.

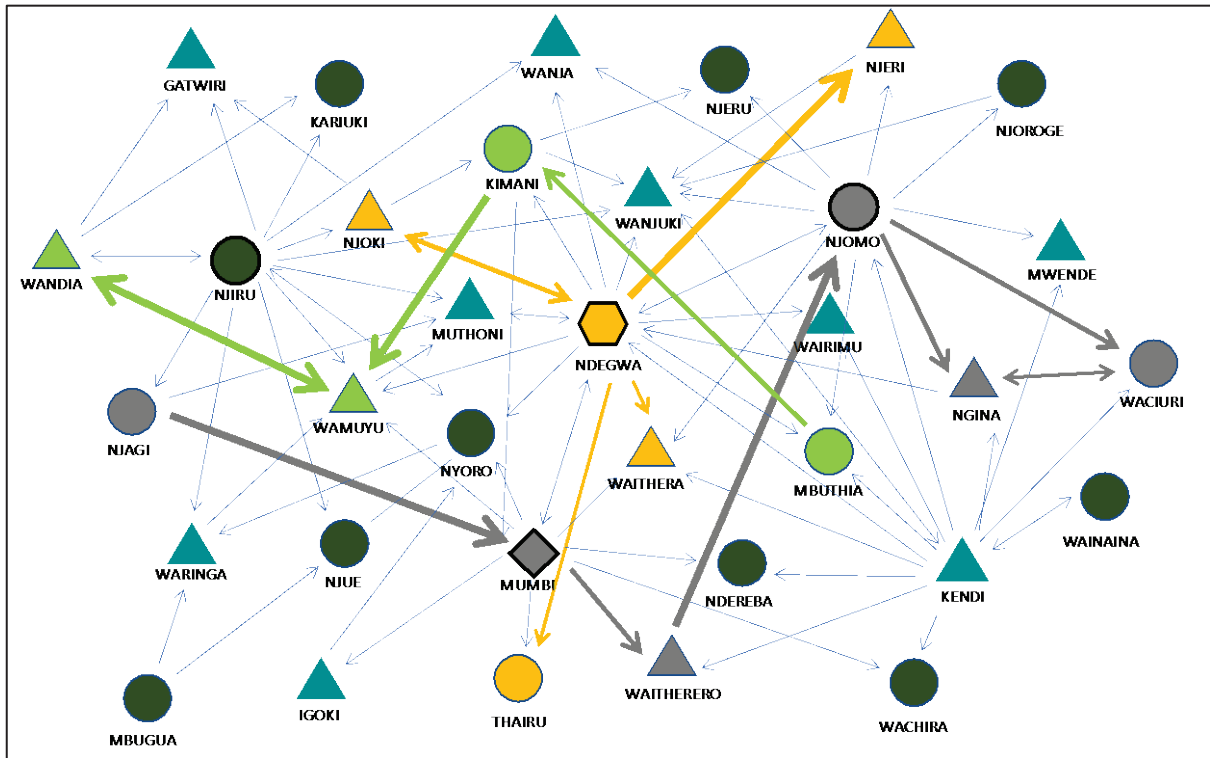


Figure 3: Raila is the anti-Christ. Digital and plug-off spaces network – created by the author.

Three local pastors, Ndegwa, Njomo, and Mumbi, were vocal in warning their followers about the dangers of Raila's 'kasumba ya ukristo' (dominance of Christianity) sentiments. The messaging was highly concentrated among the church goers, such as Njiru and Wanjuki. Kimani and Mumbi used their pages on Facebook to fiercely state that Raila's message was harmful to their faith. Kendi stood out as one who used her WhatsApp group to pass on the same message. There were other notable spreaders of information beyond the digital spaces, such as Kendi and Waithera, who said that they actively influenced their chama members using the same message.

The day before the general election was calm as the campaigns had already officially concluded. The candidates were supposed to be resting, to allow the election officials time to prepare the venues, awaiting the official voting hours on 9 August 2022. There were tensions in central Kenya about the possibility of rigging in favour of President Uhuru's favourite candidate. In response to this, various candidates representing the Kenya Kwanza coalition were keen to report any suspicious occurrences. Since it was not a holiday, work in all public offices was supposed to continue normally, despite many people fearing that uncertainties might not allow them to go to work as usual. One group that had to work was the *kazi mtaani* (work at the grassroots), a group of youths that were offered casual jobs by

5. Networks of rumours

The dispensing of information among the rural populace involves relatively small and often meaningless and frequent topics in plug-off spaces. Such talks are structured around daily events. They rely on face-to-face networks that thrive on the social gatherings of various groups of people. Women-saturated networks are the most common occurrence as women have also assumed strategic roles in community development and wellbeing in organising and mobilising circles such as *chama* (self-help groups)²⁵. This kind of use and uptake of information in plug-off spaces has spilled over into digital spaces, creating networks that are highly identical to those at the village level-based, face-to-face conversations. In the sample used in this study, seven out of ten respondents reported to have texted at least three times a day when they were online. The reasons for the texts were variously offered as having been '*kujuliana hali*' (literally, getting to know how one is fairing) and to obtain the current or trending news for the day²⁶. There are also categories of respondents who assert that they use digital spaces to respond to specific issues, crises, and emergencies (sickness, school fees, stranded relatives, etc). Thus, cyclical relationships based on digital exchanges are already common in rural central Kenya. The debates in and coordination of these conversations at times account for the spread of news and current issues. As some topics create channels of support, they also act as leads to news that help locals make critical decisions such as for whom to vote. Rumours exploit these relations, but also bear potential to form new ones.

Almost all of the four sets of sociograms drawn from the sample in this study show a dominance of reciprocal ties. Reciprocal ties comprise stories that revolve around the participants, and are therefore said to be bidirectional. Reciprocal ties imply that individuals are both senders and receivers (Kusimba *et al.* 2016). However, key individuals at the highest level dominate as 'sources' of information. Therefore, we can describe them as sending information to a circulating pool. The circulating pool is described as such since individuals are not specific on how they wish to use information, rather focusing only on spreading it. In the circulating pool, individuals are highly connected to their peers. This dense connection of support is not only crucial for spreading rumours, but is also key to benefiting the source (giver), who usually harbours political ambitions.

²⁵ Social organisations similar to chama are prevalent in most parts of Africa and are often leveraged to mitigate the absence of the state's provision of social safety nets in harsh economic environments. In other parts of Africa, associations similar to chama include *susu* in Ghana (Gugerty 2007, Osei-Assibey 2015). *Chama* are largely associated with women, as they are the most active participants, although recent trends suggest that men are also increasingly adopting the *chama* model. The primary purpose of *chama* is to enable its members to save money through revolving funds, and sometimes to provide access to credit. Thus, the emphasis is on the entrepreneurial proclivity of its members; however, they also act as a redeeming quality for the most vulnerable families in rural and urban poor populations (Mwatha 1996). *Chama* have been vigorously penetrating Kenya's rural regions and changing the local people's livelihoods. Some of the data on *chama* sampled in Kenya suggests that there are approximately 400,000 registered and 900,000 non-registered groups that identify as *chama*. It is also estimated that at the national level, six out of ten Kenyan adults are said to belong to such groups (see Central Bank of Kenya (CBK) *et al.* 2016). *Chama*, as observed during the fieldwork, have overarching characteristics, such as the holding of regular meetings on weekly, fortnight, or monthly bases. For more information on *chama*, see Nyangau (2014), Kinyanjui (2014), Kinyanjui and Khayesi (2005), and Mwatha (1996).

²⁶ Interview with community leader, Muthoni Nyaga, a resident of Manyatta, on 5 August 2022.

The networks formed are highly characterised by three main issues. The first is dense ties among people belonging to *chama*. The second category involves regular attendees to religious places of worship, mainly churches. Both categories are highly dominated by women, since women tend to be more likely to participate in local *chama*. The third most prevalent issue regarding these networks is that they prominently feature individuals who harbour political ambitions and are at a stage of mobilising specific candidates that they support. These individuals had formed campaign teams to mobilise votes in the 2022 elections, and thus their networks can be described as temporal. Table 1 shows the density of ties and relationships among women and church groups, campaign teams, table banking, *Nyumba kumi*, and work colleagues, which shows that networks are formed by dense ties of family, friendships, neighbourliness, and where they derive livelihoods.

6. Strength of women ties and its centrality

Individuals of varying age, gender, and socio-economic status have proved to be central in these networks; that is, they have more connections among themselves and/or connections to other well-connected nodes (Newman 2010, Prell 2011). These individuals, depicted as central nodes, were designated as having larger nodes in the sociogram. For example, and perhaps an obvious case, those individuals who sought elective posts were easy targets or were consulted as sources of news; thus, they were well connected among the group leaders and general public. As a result of their connectivity, they easily created paths for returning to public life that assured them of resources, a level of stability, and a voice in the community.

The sample of the four social networks, however, singled out women actors, who were seen to be dominating, by sets of actors identified in similar colours on the sociograms. These sets of women groups have striking similarities, and may often be connected to one another through the activities in which they engaged. The strength of women leaders (shown by larger nodes) can be seen in that they have more connections and are often targeted by ‘bloggers’. Although ‘bloggers’ have a stronger influence on digital platforms, they rely on women group leaders’ influence to assert their presence to plug-off audiences. The sociogram in Figure 4 shows two nodes that represent central individuals (with hexagons and diamonds). These nodes represent active individuals in digital spaces (Munene and Nduati) who described themselves as bloggers. Although their popularity is rife on digital platforms, it is not the case in plug-off spaces²⁷. To reach out to people in plug-off spaces, who were crucial in determining the outcomes of the elections, Munene and Nduati had to build stronger connections with the most connected nodes in plug-off spaces. Munene’s target was Makena, who described herself as

²⁷ Conversations during the focused group discussion on 7 August 2022 revealed that individuals in plug-off spaces had not heard of, nor were they familiar with the most popular individuals on digital platforms, including Munene and Nduati.

the chairperson of the local women group, a church choir leader, and stated that she was an active member of three *chama*. This shows that women's strength surpasses the hierarchies that seem to consolidate men's centrality, which is based on age or leadership position. Central women could be the youngest; however, they assert their influence on the *chama* they lead, and these *chama* help them to increase their ties.

7. 'Bloggers' ['Keyboard warriors'] as brokers

Brokerage is a state in which actors connect interconnected actors, thus bridging the gap in a social structure. Brokers can facilitate a transfer of knowledge, and are therefore involved with coordinating efforts across networks. It is considered as advantageous, elemental, and crucial to social networks (Stovel and Shaw 2012, Burt 2005). A broker is an individual who acts as a unique tie between two groups of nodes, who can control the flow of resources from part of a network to another and bring crucial new resources to that group (Granovetter 1983). In sociograms 1, 2, 3, and 4, brokers are identified as key people whose networks cut across several respondents and are represented by diamonds (women) and hexagons (male) to show that they have unique ties as brokers between information and digital and plug-off spaces. Various people in plug-off spaces depend on these brokers to circulate news. Brokerage is common in these networks because even in plug-off spaces, authenticity is built through heed to take charge of stories and gain reputation as an 'informed citizen'.

All the nodes that were identified as brokers represent individuals with clear aspirations for political positions, both in the present and in the future, and are active 'bloggers' spreading their own information that varies in categories such as motivational stories and spiritual nourishment. They also often appear to share statements in support of their preferred political candidates in national or local-level political battlegrounds. Thus, they are a unique tie between the different sets of networked nodes and, using their 'blogging', they control the flow of stories from one network to another. The ethnographic evidence revealed at least three 'bloggers' who brokered a set of networked nodes. Munene, an aspiring senator, has active messaging called 'Pastor's Desk' in sociogram 4 and regulates messaging on a WhatsApp group called Embu Leadership Forum (ELF)²⁸ as an administrator. In another example, in sociogram 1, Njeri combines active messaging on her Facebook page with frequent visits to various women-focused *chama* and funeral vigils across Embu.

8. Conclusion

This study is concerned with the key question of the kind of networks that facilitate the spread of rumours during elections in Kenya. We conducted SNA on ethnographic data collected in central Kenya

²⁸ The ELF was initially created as a youth-leadership forum initiative. It has transformed into an open portal for various information, including job search and advertisements.

during the 2022 general elections. Using this dataset, we examine four key rumours, aiming at the networks they forged during the campaigns and considering the different sets of networks that were formed by these rumours in digital and plug-off spaces. Rumour networks on digital platforms were based mostly on the popularity of the ‘blogger’, followed by the status they held in the society.

A key finding in this study is that youthful women seem to be the key central nodes in the networks of rumours since they bear larger connections to other nodes. This is an outcome of the vigorous involvement of women in community-level activities, to which *chama* seems to be central. Meanwhile, prospective candidates (aspiring) appeared as brokers across the various groups in digital and plug-off spaces.

Rumours were found to flow within specific, digital-based groups (in this study, we focused on Facebook groups, although our interviewees mentioned the use of WhatsApp groups), and at times through sets of individuals on private walls, posts, and people connected to them. Ties to the aspiring leaders were critical pathways to the success and spread of messaging packaged as rumours.

The potential for transformations (socially, politically, and economically) by the networking individuals underscores the broader role of information communication technologies (ICTs) and capacity of online engagements to shape networks (Ilahiane and Sherry 2008). It further highlights that ICT has the capabilities to shape groups’ sociability (Ling and Stald 2010). This study uses SNA to capture the various possibilities of ICT as an agency for transformation in rural Africa by accounting for the network structures that were formed as individuals participated in election-related rumours. Through these rumours, the social cohesion within groups was enhanced and sometimes amplified through calls to participate in the voting exercise.

This study shows that rumours that appear on digital platforms have a capacity to circulate along dense and reciprocal pathways, entwining specific actors more than others. As these rumours spread, they create bonds or re-create bonds of reciprocity based on vernacular, face-to-face, network patterns in people’s lifeworlds. Thus, enduring practices of reciprocity within society’s sense of belonging, obligation, and exclusion inspires these networks to thrive. There are several similarities between how these rumours are shaped on digital platforms and how they spread face-to-face. Rather than simplified attempts to identify ‘fake news’, this study underscores how rural populations assert their voices on digital platforms with the intent for an equal space for contestation. We do this by following Musila’s (2017) thoughts, which we consider as centring on an emphasis on the particularity of local epistemes and their interactions with the universal discourses in digital spaces. We claim that this underscores the overarching importance of furthering research and practices that promote diverse comprehensions of rural livelihoods, especially those emerging from the contemporary youthful populace of rural Africa.

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