

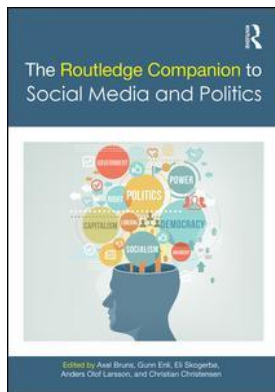
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Axel Bruns, Gunn Enli, Eli Skogerbø, Anders Olof Larsson, Christian Christensen

### Social Media and Election Campaigns in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Teke Ngomba

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# SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

## Insights from Cameroon

*Teke Ngomba*

### Introduction

Within the last four years, election campaigns in some African countries such as Nigeria (2011), Ghana (2012), Kenya (2013), and South Africa (2014) have been followed by extensive commentaries on the appropriation of social media by politicians in these countries (Ogunlesi 2013; Mutiga 2013; Ndlela, Chapter 33 in this volume). On the surface, these regularly cited, high-profile instances of social media use by politicians in these countries give the impression that all the continent's politicians are hopping onto social media platforms in massive numbers.

The reality, however, is more nuanced both within and between countries. This point is illustrated by an article in the influential pan-African magazine *Jeune Afrique* titled, 'Twitter: Why are Francophone African leaders this lousy?' arguing that some politicians in French-speaking countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)—compared to their English-speaking counterparts—are even 'allergic' to social media (Olivier 2013). This argument is in line with the Cameroonian experience thus far with regards to politicians' use of social media (especially in the context of election campaigns).

This chapter examines this phenomenon by going beyond the 'usual suspects' of Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa when it comes to studying issues concerning the political appropriation of the Internet or social media in SSA. It discusses how Cameroonian politicians have used social media during recent election campaigns. Drawing on mainstream newspaper coverage of recent election campaigns in Cameroon and an analysis of how three candidates used Facebook during the 2013 legislative and municipal elections, this chapter demonstrates and explains the tepid adoption of social media by Cameroonian politicians thus far, and reflects on what the Cameroonian experience suggests in relation to scholarly efforts to understand the relationship between developments in the media sector and changes in campaign communication.

While there is a significant volume of research on politicians' use of social media in American and European contexts (e.g. Gibson et al 2014; Jungherr 2014), we know

little about the use of social media in politics on a global level. The existing research is thus far from representative, and, SSA is one region with wide gaps in our understanding of the uses and impacts of social media during election campaigns. The research gap is explained by lack of studies mainly due to the novelty of the phenomenon. Furthermore, even in countries with access to social media, it is terribly difficult to obtain updated, reliable, and verifiable statistics (see *Balancing Act 2014*: 46–48).

In the case of Cameroon, the lack of research is particularly eye catching, and has been commented on by van Reijswoud (2014: 32), who underlines that, “the use of social media and other Web 2.0 tools in general and for socio-political [activities] in particular, has not been systematically researched” and that there is indeed, “hardly” any data available. This means that unlike how things operate in Europe or North America, in Cameroon, as in most of SSA, there is currently more journalistic and other public commentary on social media and elections than theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous peer-reviewed academic research.

These commentaries (and the few pieces of academic research) have shown that with an increasing number of Africans—especially youth—gaining access to the Internet thanks in large part to mobile Internet connectivity, popular social media sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Twitter have risen to be among the most visited sites in several countries (*Balancing Act 2014*: 8). Taking note of this, politicians have in recent elections across SSA used social media as part of their campaign communication strategies.

The few instances of significant uses of social media in recent election campaigns across SSA have shown that scope and technical sophistication aside, in terms of overall patterns, African politicians have been using social media more or less like their counterparts in Europe and North America. Their social media platforms have, for instance, been used mainly to disseminate information rather than to engage in dialogue with ordinary citizens (see Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke 2014).

Overall, the general picture emerging is that, on average—and beyond a few high-profile exceptions like Guillaume Soro (President of the National Assembly in Côte d’Ivoire), President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, and President Paul Kagame of Rwanda—the use of social media by politicians in SSA is still tepid. Earlier observations of the Cameroonian scene have also confirmed the presence of these central patterns: a generalised low use of social media by politicians; in case of use, a preference for ‘broadcasting’ information rather than engaging in interactions with ordinary citizens; and last, the tendency for social media profiles to be abandoned shortly after elections (Tande 2011; Langmia 2013; van Reijswoud 2014).

Given the paucity of empirical research on politicians’ uses of social media during election campaigns in Cameroon, and in a bid to extend understanding of this phenomenon, this chapter examines how three candidates used Facebook during the 2013 legislative and municipal elections in Cameroon.

### **Cameroon: Key Background Information**

Following the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1990, Cameroon, with a population of about 22.5 million, has been experiencing significant political, socioeconomic and technological changes. Prominent among these has been the liberalisation of the media landscape. As a result, Cameroon now has a burgeoning media system characterised by an interesting mix of forcefully emerging modern media of communication

and persistent forms of indigenous communication. One of these modern means of communication—the Internet—was introduced in Cameroon in the late 1990s. In October 2014, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications indicated that about 6.5 per cent of Cameroonians had access to the Internet and an estimated 15.2 million Cameroonians were mobile phone subscribers. While this Internet penetration rate is modest, the fact that more and more ordinary Cameroonians are gradually gaining access to the Internet through their mobile phones has spurred some media and political attention on the political affordances of the Internet (van Reijswoud 2014).

These discussions took a major turn in 2011 when one of the 23 presidential candidates, Kah Walla, gained significant media attention following her strategic appropriation of online campaigning, notably through a splashy website, YouTube channel, and Facebook page. These strategies led Kah Walla to become the first Cameroonian politician to demonstrate a focused and proactive appropriation of social media during election campaigns (Tande 2011; Ngomba 2014). At that time, however, it was estimated that less than 500,000 Cameroonians were using Facebook. With an understanding that the number of Cameroonians using different social media will increase after the 2011 presidential elections, many observers expected the next general elections in Cameroon to feature a significant use of social media, especially after the ‘Kah Walla phenomenon’.

Current statistics on actual use of social media in Cameroon are hard to come by, but recent estimates indicate that Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are the most popular social media platforms in Cameroon (van Reijswoud 2014). By the legislative and municipal elections on 30 September 2013, it was estimated that there were about 760,000 Facebook users in Cameroon (van Reijswoud 2014: 12). As concerns Twitter, the 2012 study *How Africa Tweets*, which analysed geo-located Twitter traffic for three months, recorded 30,444 tweets from Cameroon. This pales in significance to the ‘output’ from other countries such as South Africa (5,030,226), Kenya (2,476,800), and Nigeria (1,646,212; Portland Communications 2012: 5). While these data are not conclusive about the actual number of active Twitter users in Cameroon, they nonetheless suggest that there may now be several hundreds of thousands of active Twitter users.

It is against this background of a modest but perceptible increase in access to the Internet and social media, and an anticipation of more political uses of social media, that the most recent legislative and municipal elections took place in September 2013. These elections therefore provide a good opportunity to examine Cameroonian politicians’ use—or non-use—of social media in the context of election campaigns. Such analyses also offer the opportunity to see if, in the context of a changing media ecology, there have been corresponding major changes as far as the central practices of campaigns in Cameroon are concerned. Since the official reintroduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon in 1990, two central practices have characterised the conduct of election campaigns in the country: the widespread distribution of money and other material goods to the electorate and the prioritisation of door-to-door campaign strategies over media-based initiatives (see Ngomba 2012).

These campaign practices and the existing analyses have thus far taken place prior to the spread of social media across Cameroon. The increasing use of social media platforms by Cameroonians especially within the last two to three years, therefore, leaves room to question whether recent campaign practices are different from those of the past, especially given the possibility to directly target potential voters through social media. Briefly, how have Cameroonian politicians used social media during recent election

campaigns? Overall, is there any significant change in campaign practices in Cameroon in the context of the spread of social media amongst the electorate? These are the core issues addressed in this chapter through the examination of how three politicians used social media in the 2013 legislative and municipal elections.

### Data and Methods

On 30 September 2013, thousands of candidates took part in the legislative and municipal elections in Cameroon, which are party and list based.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-nine political parties representing 212 lists competed for 180 seats in the National Assembly; and 35 political parties, representing 751 lists, competed for the control of Cameroon's 360 councils. For both elections, candidates are elected through a mixed single round ballot comprising a majority and proportional representation system. So the way the system is designed, individual candidates (and thus personal attributes of candidates) are important during campaigns but only under the banner of political parties, since they have to campaign for a party list. This means that that in many cases candidates simultaneously adopt both a personalised and party-based campaign strategy.

The main selection criterion for this study has been mentions of a candidate's campaign activities online and on social media in selected news reports. I used this approach because I assumed that, as they have done in past elections, newspapers will regularly report on parties' and candidates' campaign communication strategies. This information about different campaign communication strategies will then help to situate the discussions of the use or non-use of social media within a broader perspective of communicative ecologies present during campaigns. Briefly, by looking at all relevant news reports about candidates' campaign communication strategies, it will be possible to get a good idea of which kinds of communication strategies are common and prioritised and which are absent, thus side-lined in the context of mediated and non-mediated communication possibilities. Furthermore, based on past research (Ngomba 2012), I assumed that most candidates may not use social media, and that any candidate effectively using social media will most likely feature in media reports since this will be newsworthy given the novelty this will represent in the Cameroonian context (Ngomba 2014).

Based on the above, I chose five of the six dailies in Cameroon (the state-owned bilingual newspaper *Cameroon Tribune* and the private dailies *Le Messenger*; *Le Jour*; *La Nouvelle Expression* and *Mutations*—all published in French) and one bi-weekly (*The Post*, the main English language newspaper in Cameroon). The timeframe selected was the coverage of the campaigns during the official two weeks of the campaigns plus one day after the elections (15 September 2013 to 1 October 2013). Unfortunately, as indicated in Table 32.1, a few issues of the selected newspapers could not be obtained in time before this analysis, but, this notwithstanding, the issues available are substantial enough to give a representative view of the mainstream print media coverage of the election campaigns.

For the issues obtained, all reports focusing on the elections were read and divided into the following sections: news and features, interviews, opinion pieces (this includes things like editorials or commentaries by journalists or external contributors), and documents (this includes things like ministerial orders, campaign manifestos or press releases). Table 32.1 gives an overview of the number of reports published for each category, per newspaper, excluding the issues of the newspapers that could not be obtained.

Table 32.1 List of Newspapers and Reports

Newspaper	News and Features	Interviews	Opinion Pieces	Documents	Total
<i>Cameroon Tribune</i>	295	61	29	17	402
<i>Le Messenger</i> *	78	13	5	3	99
<i>Le Jour</i> **	87	3	19	3	112
<i>La Nouvelle Expression</i> ***	110	7	3	3	123
<i>Mutations</i>	124	17	14	3	158
<i>The Post</i> ****	55	2	7	0	64
<b>Total</b>	<b>749</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>958</b>

\*Excluding the issues of 16 September, 17 September, and 1 October.

\*\*Excluding the issue of 16 September.

\*\*\*Excluding the issue of 1 October.

\*\*\*\*Excluding the issue of 16 September.

All of the 958 reports were read and coded with a particular focus on the campaign communication strategies mentioned in the report. On the basis of these, all the reports mentioning social media were read thoroughly to sort out any candidate identified as having a focused online campaign strategy. As it turned out, very few mentions were made of social media in these reports. Just eight reports mentioned social media: one from *Le Jour* (27 September p. 5); one from *Le Messenger* (27 September p. 7); two from *La Nouvelle Expression* (26 September p. 4). and four from *Cameroon Tribune* (18 September p. 4; 24 September p. 11; and 26 September p. 11).

Of these reports, just two focused on social media use in the campaigns. These include a feature report and an interview published by *La Nouvelle Expression* of 26 September 2013. Actually, the angle of the feature report was on the fact that candidates for the elections were *not* making much use of social media; and, a similar angle was used in the interview with the president of the union of online journalists in Cameroon: why politicians are not making much use of social media.

Just two candidates were specifically mentioned as having a focused online campaign strategy: Albert Dooh-Collins of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (*Cameroon Tribune* of 26 September and *Le Jour* of 27 September) and Joshua Osih of the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (*Cameroon Tribune* of 26 September). Both were candidates for the legislative elections in Douala, Cameroon's economic and media capital. Although other candidates such as Olivier Bile of the Union for Fraternity and Prosperity and Ayah Paul of the People's Action Party were mentioned as being 'regularly present on Facebook' (*La Nouvelle Expression* of 26 September), an examination of Ayah Paul's Facebook page, for instance, shows that during the entire official two week campaign period, only one post was made on his page: the party's manifesto posted on 15 September 2013. His Twitter page as of 10 November 2014 had just 55 followers and four tweets—the first sent on 8 December 2010 and the last on 14 December 2010. So, he had used it for just one week, four years ago.

In addition to selecting Joshua Osih and Dooh-Collins, I added one other opposition candidate, Kah Walla of the Cameroon People's Party, even though she was not singled out as having a social media strategy in these reports. I added her because in 2011, as mentioned earlier, she was prominent as one of the candidates for the presidential elections, thanks in a large part to her pioneering use of social media. Since she was a candidate for the municipal elections in 2013 (also in Douala) it seemed interesting to examine if and how she used social media.

Only the Facebook pages of these candidates have been examined principally because, from all available estimates, Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Cameroon. Furthermore, the three candidates did not really use Twitter. While Joshua Osih has a relatively active Twitter profile, updated during the 2013 election campaigns, a comparison of his Facebook profile with his Twitter profile shows that both contained very much the same material within the campaign period. Dooh-Collins does not have a Twitter account and the four Twitter profiles associated with Kah Walla all date back to her 2011 presidential campaign and the only one with tweets (@kahwallaamis) was last updated on 18 August 2011—about two months before the presidential election.

Since all three candidates used Facebook, their profiles were checked and all the postings published from 1 to 29 September 2013 were collected and analysed. This covers the two weeks before the official campaigns and the two weeks of the official campaigns (15–29 September). In particular, the goal was to analyse what characterised the postings, including the mode and level of interactivity in these online platforms as seen through the numbers of Likes, Comments, and Shares. As Gerodimos and Justinussen (2014) pointed out, there is currently 'little empirical work on engagement through social media' especially on how people are using 'social buttons' such as 'Like' as 'metrics of civic engagement.' By looking at such engagements on these candidates' pages, it is hoped that a further empirical angle from SSA can be added to preliminary examinations of such forms of online engagements. The postings were categorised under the following headings:

- Campaign manifesto/slogan/poster.
- Announcements about upcoming campaign activities or events (e.g. holding of rallies, media appearances).
- Reports on campaign activities (these include pictures, videos or texts about past campaign activities).
- Campaign rhetoric (this includes brief commentaries about the candidate; his or her policies; or about other competing candidates or parties and their policies).
- Internal media linkage (this includes a link or information about another party or candidate-controlled site containing information about the candidate or his or her party).
- External media linkage (this includes a link or information about the candidate or his or her party published elsewhere).
- Others (any other posting which does not fit any of the categories above).

In addition, the number of Likes, Comments, and Shares for each posting was recorded and an average obtained. A more focused analysis of the most Liked, Shared, and Commented postings as well as the candidates' commenting patterns is presented below.

## Findings

The three candidates used Facebook, but they joined the social network at different times; Kah Walla's Facebook profile<sup>2</sup> was created on 19 July 2011, about three months before she took part in the 2011 presidential elections. Joshua Osih's profile<sup>3</sup> was established on 5 September 2013, which is 10 days before the official start of campaigns for the Legislative and Municipal elections. As for Dooh-Collins, he established his Facebook profile<sup>4</sup> on 21 September 2013, about one week *after* the commencement of the election campaigns, and barely eight days before its end.

While Kah Walla's and Joshua Osih's cases align with the tendency for politicians in Africa to gain an online presence only shortly before elections, Dooh-Collins's case suggests that the decision to use Facebook came as an afterthought. This may also explain what has happened after the elections: as of 10 November 2014, their respective Facebook pages show that Joshua Osih last posted on his Facebook page on 5 November 2014, Kah Walla on 7 November 2014, and Dooh-Collins on 7 October 2013—more than a year ago (and just after the elections).

With regards to the number of posts and the level of interaction exhibited, as seen in Table 32.2, Joshua Osih had the most active presence on Facebook and also garnered more interactions (with an average of two posts per day) during the period studied. He similarly outperforms the other candidates with each of his posts garnering on average about 28 Likes; 13 Comments, and was Shared about three times.

'Liking' emerges as the most popular form of online interaction on these candidates' Facebook profiles eclipsing 'more active' modes of participation like commenting and sharing information with others. For some, this pattern may be a pointer towards a manifestation of one of the travails of digital political participation as encompassed in the notion of 'slacktivism' (Morozov, 2011). While this can be an important pointer, as others have shown, 'Likes' are actually important when perceived as affective endorsements of a politician and his or her assertions or actions (Gerodimos and Justinussen 2014).

Since the focus was on counting the number of Likes, Comments and Shares for each post, it is hard to make a definite assessment on who were those taking part in these forms of interactions: whether for instance, the same people 'Liking' were also those Commenting and Sharing. Also, this approach makes it difficult to assess whether only a few people dominated the discussions through several comments. In scanning through all the comments to see if there was any trace of this for instance, it emerged that only in Kah Walla's profile was there a clear case of this. All seven comments on her post of 17 September 2013, for instance, were from one individual. But this is an

Table 32.2 Overview of Facebook Posts and Interactions

Candidate	Total Posts	Total Likes	Total Comments	Total Shares	Comments by Candidates
Joshua Osih	54	1,477	691	166	45
Kah Walla	11	154	35	15	2
Dooh-Collins	8	85	18	5	3



exception which underscores the need for caution in drawing conclusions from quantitative overviews of Comments or Likes per post.

What is possible to ascertain, however, is the kinds of comments made by the candidates themselves beyond the posts on their walls. The dominant types of comments from the candidates are messages to express gratitude to commenters for their support, and an exhortation for them to vote for the candidate on election day. All of Dooh-Collins's messages are in these category, as is one of the two comments from Kah Walla (the other is a response to a commenter who wanted to know why her party was not represented nationally). For Joshua Osih, who is far more active, the dominant types of comments are: 'thank you' messages, exhortations to vote and assuring commenters that there will be less rigging during the elections. In fact, more than half of Osih's comments fall into this third category (25 out of 45). He nonetheless gets into a discussion with other commenters on a range of issues including the situation of health care in Cameroon, the place of youths in the SDF party and how best to curb corruption. These latter discussions are more in tune with regularly expressed desires for more deliberative democratic interactivity between politicians and citizens in online spaces.

But, these few instances notwithstanding, there is an overwhelming tendency for the candidates to engage in *courtesy* rather than *deliberative* engagements with commenters. The preference for this form of engagement resonates with the overall nature of the posts from candidates during the period under study. As shown in Table 32.3, the candidates also adopted a 'broadcast' style with regards to the utilisation of Facebook: a tactic we have seen in previous studies from other regions of the world (see Gerodimos and Justinussen 2014). The candidates' posts consisted mostly of information about their manifestos, announcements about campaign-related events and reports about campaign activities (often using pictures rather than texts).

As seen in Table 32.3, Joshua Osih had the most diversified posts covering all the different categories. Furthermore, unlike Dooh-Collins and Kah Walla, Joshua Osih's posts had a 'personal touch' to them via his use of campaign rhetoric and 'personalisation' of

Table 32.3 Types of Posts

Category	Dooh-Collins	Kah Walla	Joshua Osih
Campaign manifesto, slogan, or poster	3	2	5
Announcement about campaign activities	3	–	14
Reports on campaign activities	1	9	22
Campaign rhetoric	–	–	5
Internal media linkage	1	–	4
External media linkage	–	–	2
Others	–	–	2
<b>Total Posts</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>54</b>

announcements about campaign activities. On the former, for instance, on 22 September 2013, he posted this Facebook update:

The minimum wage in Cameroon is about 28,300 frs, the lowest in the continent. But in neighboring Chad—which was receiving food aid from us few years back, the minimum wage is 85 thousand. My dear brothers, it is time for these miseries to end in Cameroon. (Joshua Osih, 22 September 2013)

None of the other candidates used such personal rhetorical strategies. While the available data are indeed minimal to make any firm conclusions, it is clear from Joshua Osih's postings, both in terms of scale and content, that he personally managed his Facebook profile, took his engagement on Facebook seriously, and perhaps understood more than his counterparts the informal nature of communication on Facebook. These latter points are seen, for instance, in the way he tended to combine announcements about campaign activities and invitations to these. On 22 September 2013 for instance, he wrote that

we are waiting for many of you, my very dear ones: Dear Friends, we have a rally this evening at 8 pm at the Douala polytechnique entrance, part in Bes-sengue. We are waiting for many of you. (Joshua Osih, 22 September 2013)

Given that Facebook is a 'personal medium', suitable for personalised communication, it is fairly remarkable that none of the candidates significantly personalised their posts. Rather, they posted impersonally and focused on 'official business', such as campaign reports, announcements, policies, and so on. No candidate for instance, posted personal pictures showing them doing domestic chores, or spending time with their families—things for which Facebook is known and, as previous research has shown, politicians like Barack Obama have appropriated strategically (see Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2014). Further research on this, combined with interviews with the politicians, will be useful to throw more light on the prevalence and rationale of this strategy because while this may suggest a desire to construct a public image of seriousness, it may be a shortcoming as politicians fail to make a more 'personal connection' with potential voters—a move which, as will be indicated below, is vital for electoral success.

On the topic of 'personal touch' and engagement, one of the central issues regarding online political interactivity concerns attempts to understand what kinds of content citizens either engage with or ignore on politicians' social media profiles. Given the exploratory nature of this study, I looked at the most Liked, Shared, and Commented posts of the candidates to see if this can suggest anything provisionally. Given that he had more diverse posts, the case of Joshua Osih may be more instructive in orienting us towards what kinds of contents citizens are prone to engage with on politicians' social media pages. As seen below, the most Liked, Shared and Commented post from Osih are all campaign rhetoric, suggesting that posts with a more personal voice of the candidate can generate more engagement. As indicated earlier, content coded under 'campaign rhetoric' include brief commentaries about the candidate, his or her policies, or about other competing candidates or parties and their policies.

**Most Liked Post:** A statement saying if elected, he will propose a law to oblige all civil servants to be treated in hospitals in Cameroon in a bid to force the government

to construct good hospitals and stop the tendency for medical evacuations abroad for civil servants (posted, 21 September, 114 Likes).

**Post with Most Comments:** A statement, summarising an interview he granted a journalist, castigating the government for the poor state of public schools (posted, 26 September, 54 Comments).

**Most Shared Post:** A statement castigating the minimum wage in Cameroon and declaring that it is time to change this (posted, 22 September, Shared by 30 people).

Overall, the findings presented above suggest that by privileging reportage on campaign-related events and courtesy engagements over more interactive approaches in their Facebook posts, the candidates demonstrated that the ‘broadcast mentality’ of how politicians have approached social media in different political contexts also resonates in Cameroon. Beyond this, and importantly, the findings clearly demonstrate the non-prioritisation of Facebook as an effective campaign communication outlet.

Why this non-prioritisation? Often, issues such as limited access to the Internet or lack of financial and human resources are offered as explanations for the limited use of the Internet or social media by politicians and parties in SSA. While these are of course important, the Cameroonian case suggests that we need to move beyond offering technical and financial constraints as explanations of this phenomenon. As indicated earlier, arguably, a major (if not *the* major) reason why social media, like all other media, are not prioritised by parties and politicians in Cameroon during campaigns is because politicians believe that they are not effective tools for securing electoral victory—the major focus of virtually all politicians. Radio for instance, has more reach than the Internet, but also is not prioritised.

This is not to suggest that the media do not matter, only that they matter less as compared to non-mediated campaign strategies. In fact, during the 2013 Legislative and Municipal election campaigns, candidates and parties used a variety of communication strategies, both mediated and non-mediated. The ruling CPDM, for instance, paid for the publication of its manifesto in private newspapers; its candidates used the free time available on the state broadcaster for all competing parties to pass on its messages, but even with all its financial might and enormous human resources, the official method of campaigning approved and recommended by the party hierarchy in 2013 as well as in all previous elections was door-to-door campaigning.

The 958 reports examined for this study indicate that, overwhelmingly, all the competing parties and candidates prioritised and extensively used non-mediated campaign communication strategies, especially door-to-door strategies. Headlines such as ‘The Door-to-Door Chorus’ (*Mutations* of 19 September 2013), ‘East: The Opposition Opts for Door-to-Door’ (*La Nouvelle Expression* of 18 September 2013), ‘Centre: Priority on Proximity’ and ‘Extreme North: Door-to-Door in Yagoua’ (*Cameroon Tribune* of 18 September 2013) all capture the inherent tendencies in contemporary election campaigns in Cameroon and show that the arrival and relative spread of social media has not changed the country’s central campaign dynamics. These tendencies, as Ngomba (2012) has argued, have led to the rather paradoxical situation that developments in the media sector have been accompanied not by a prioritisation of mediated campaign strategies, but rather an overwhelming adoption of door-to-door campaign strategies across all political parties. As Ngomba (2012) showed, and as the reports mentioned above indicate, this prioritisation of what are generally termed ‘proximity strategies’ is anchored in the belief that they are more effective (for a discussion of a similar paradox in Taiwan, see Schafferer, 2009: 390; for Latin America, see Szwarcberg 2014).

These proximity campaigns also ‘align’ with the communication culture of a preference for face-to-face communication in Cameroon (Mbaku 2005:172), a practice that provides politicians and other elites with the opportunity to distribute money and other things like rice, soap and salt to the electorate. Campaign news reports with headlines such as ‘Corruption Is Doing Well’ (*La Nouvelle Expression* of 20 September 2013) and ‘CPDM Campaign: El Hadj Nana Bouba Argues Gastronomically’ (*Le Messenger* of 20 September 2013) point to the continuous presence of these practices that are in line with arguments highlighted earlier about the political instrumentalisation of clientelism and patronage during election campaigns in Cameroon and most of SSA.

### Conclusion

The central purpose of this chapter has been to provide an overview and a new empirical contribution to the discussions about the use of social media by political parties and candidates during election campaigns in SSA. Looking at how three politicians in Cameroon used Facebook in the context of the 2013 legislative and municipal election campaigns, the chapter has shown that the candidates adopted a ‘broadcasting’ approach with regards to their use, and focused their interactions on courtesy rather than deliberative engagements.

Overall, these findings suggest a non-prioritisation of social media as an effective campaign tool in Cameroon. This contrasts sharply with the significant prioritisation of non-mediated campaign communication strategies that are perceived to be more effective. So, while commentators tend to criticise politicians and parties for side-lining social media in Cameroon (see, for instance, Tande 2011), the experiences of politicians ‘on the ground’ make these criticisms seem uninformed. The Cameroonian case suggests that, as in Taiwan (Schafferer 2009), beyond issues of access, financial capabilities of parties/politicians or the regulatory framework governing campaigns, the perception of the effectiveness of a medium significantly influences the extent to which it can be adopted and prioritised within a campaign strategy. For Cameroonian politicians, while the costs of adopting a media-based campaign strategy are certain, its benefits, compared to other strategies, are not (see Cardenal 2011 for a discussion of this in relation to parties’ use of the Internet in Spain and Catalonia).

How this will play out in the years ahead is a matter of opinion, but given the increase in social media use in the region, and that the diaspora can now vote in referenda and presidential elections, it is possible that by the 2018 presidential election, parties and candidates will make more use of social media. Whether this potential increase in use of social media by parties and candidates will result in actual changes in the patterns of this use will remain to be seen. But the experiences of more established democracies with a longer history of the use of the Internet in campaigns seem to suggest a need for cautious optimism (see Gibson et al. 2014).

Accordingly, it seems likely that, as with radio, television and newspapers, social media will continue to play only a marginal role in election campaigns in Cameroon for a very long time. On the other hand, Cameroonian politicians will most likely continue to prioritise proximity-based campaign communication strategies—strategies that underscore a fundamental issue in electoral politics: namely that personal relations and personal contact matters significantly. This is why even in the United States, known for its pace-setting role as far as the use of social media in campaigns are concerned, the

reality is that instead of diminishing, direct contact with the electorate, referred to as the “ground war,” has instead “*increased quite dramatically*,” especially since 2000 (Beck and Heidemann 2014: 271, emphasis added). These ‘ground wars’ have been and will arguably continue to be for a long time again, the defining feature of election campaigns in Cameroon even as we witness the gradual but continuous spread of social media across the country.

## Notes

- 1 For legislative and municipal elections in Cameroon, parties compile lists of candidates based on the number of available seats per constituency. The electorate in a constituency vote for a list of candidates proposed by competing political parties without indications of preference for any candidate on the list.
- 2 <http://www.facebook.com/kah.walla>
- 3 <http://www.facebook.com/OsihJoshua>
- 4 <http://www.facebook.com/alberdoohcollins>

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