"Social media is for the elite"

Local political communication in Ghana in times of COVID-19

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1 Introduction: social media and local political communication

Social media has become established as means of political communication and political mobilization. As Lee shows, it is ideal for both political activism and campaigning (Lee 2014, pp. 201–233). The Arab Spring was probably the first large-scale protest movement that used social media, especially Facebook and Twitter for its local and international political mobilization. This use of social media even changed the balance of power between citizens and the state (Khondker 2011; Steinert-Threlkeld et al. 2015). Many other social movements and activists' actions followed globally and often intensified by their iconic hashtag. Examples for Africa include #FeesMustFall, #RhodesmustFall, #ZumaMustFall (Bosch 2017, 2019; Mpofu 2017), #SaveOurGirls, #BringBackOurGirls, #EndSARS (Oriola 2021; Holpuch 2018; Chow 2020), and those initiated from the USA and pointing at the atrocities of Uganda's infamous rebel group Lord's Resistance

Army led by Joseph Kony (Lee 2014, pp. 208–2011).[1] The election of Barack Obama in 2008 opened the internet era to politics very strongly, particularly the successful use of email lists but also Twitter and Facebook platforms for political campaigns (Lee 2014, pp. 201–203). And Obama's successor made Twitter his main channel of political communication and mobilization, with over 77 million followers until his Twitter account was blocked in 2021. This offered Trump the possibility to communicate directly with his followers thereby bypassing the traditional media. The Bolsonaro campaign in Brazil used large WhatsApp groups with several thousand members for the same purpose (Evangelista and Bruno 2019). In Africa, studies pointing to the use of the internet and social media for political campaigning are emerging (Ndlela 2020; Ndlela and Mano 2020; Boateng et al. 2020; Dzisah 2018; Dzisah 2020).

These examples demonstrate that social media is an emergent force in political communication. Even when traditional media retains its relevance, social media seems to play a crucially important role, at least, for campaigning and activism worldwide and in Africa (e.g., Bosch 2017, 2019; Dwyer et al. 2019, pp. 114–117; Orji 2019). We know that aside from the most prominent examples such as Trump in the Global North, at least, in some countries of the Global South, leading politicians and government officials actively communicate via social media (see, e.g., Bolsonaro in Brazil). The most popular African politicians with large followers on Twitter include Egypt's Abdelfattah Elsisi (5 million), Nigeria's Muhammad Buhari (4 million), Kenya's William Ruto (3.8 million), Rwanda's Paul Kagame (2.3 million), Uganda's Yoweri Museveni (2.1 million), and Ghana's Nana Akofu-Addo (1.9 million) (see Onyango 2021).[2] Analysis of election campaigns shows that governments are present on social media platforms and use them as a means to present their policy and to highlight their success. With regard to Africa, however, the use of social media for political communication still lacks systematic analysis. What we hardly find are studies that focus on the local level. Despite ongoing research interests in the increasing use of social media platforms for local and national public administration in the Global North (Haro-de-Rosario et al. 2018; Lappas et al. 2018; Bonsón et al. 2017; Hughes et al. 2012), several thematic gaps persist. For many countries in the Global South, we miss knowledge on the adaption and usage of social media applications for local government communication. This is very striking because due to the ongoing decentralization policies, the local level has become one of the major political arenas where citizens should have the chance to directly influence politics and hold their elected representatives accountable. Against this background, we delve deeper into the political communication practices in Ghana's local government arena. Knowing that in Africa access to social media is still unequally distributed in society (Dwyer and Molony 2019, pp. 2–4; see also Figure 1, p. 5), we examine the role and importance of social media in political communication at the local level. Specifically, to what extent is it used in local political and what are the topics that local government addresses via social media, especially in times of COVID-19?

For at least two reasons, an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local political communication can be expected. First, local government in many countries including Ghana is responsible for the

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[1] The documentary film used in this 2012 campaign refers to Kony's crimes in 2007 and earlier in Uganda. At the time of the campaign, Kony had been chased out of Uganda having lost his former military strength.
[2] With regard to the population of the country, Rwanda's Kagame, with 2.3 million followers, is impressive especially in contrast to Nigeria's Buhari with just 4 million followers.

implementation of health policies. Second, the restrictions associated with the pandemic, particularly the requirement to stay home and reduce personal contacts turned social media into an obvious option for communicating politically relevant information substituting traditional administration channels (see Osei-Appiah 2021; Coman et al. 2021). Despite this global incentive, most literature on the use of digital technologies including social media for crisis communication focus on the Global North (Graham et al. 2015; Alexander 2014; Kim and Liu 2012; Hagen et al. 2018). COVID-19 offers a lens to include more Southern perspectives and to explore whether and how local governments in the Global South intensified the use of social media for political communication in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. Did they, for instance, communicate new rules and regulations concerning contact restrictions? And more broadly, did they establish social media as an alternative platform for public information and debate?

We use an original dataset of public social media communications from selected local governments in Ghana to find where and to what extent pandemic-related restrictions became relevant topics in all local communities. We compare selected rural and urban communities to find variance or continuity in the use of social media before and after the pandemic had started. Given the little we know about social media use for political communication in rural Africa, our research makes hence two important contributions. First, it offers a comparative analysis of political communication in rural and urban districts in a country of the Global South. Second, it proposes methodological innovation by integrating a content analysis of social media channels with interview data. This allows us to compare political communication on social media with political issues discussed in the everyday, analogue settings. We also identify limitations to automatic data harvesting techniques that could not substitute screen scraping techniques and manual content analysis in our case. Finally, our contribution tempers the enthusiasm about access to and use of social media in provincial settings in Africa.

We consider the importance and potential of social media for mass communication to be gradual and dynamic across social spaces. This squares with the recurrent argument of councillors that "social media is for elites" (Councillor, New Juaben on February 16, 2021), at least in rural and peri-urban areas. We will show that affordability and access seem to have an important impact on the different statuses of social media. The paper starts with an overview of what social media promises for political communication and provides contextualization for the peculiar situation of Ghanaian municipalities. In the subsequent section, we analyse the everyday use of social media platforms for public engagement with the local population about decisions of their municipal government that go beyond distributing information. Next, we match the content of posts on district social media platforms against the priorities communicated in interviews for congruence and difference. We conclude by discussing the taken-for-granted importance of social media. Despite the general social media hype all around the world, we argue that expectations about the use of public social media platforms in developing countries for political communications of local governments need to be tempered in particular, because of the mismatch between content reported on social media platforms and analogue (i.e., offline) political priorities.

2 District Political Settings and Emergent Digital Communication Outlets

Generally, social media in public entities is viewed positively to serve public goals including public administration and civic engagement (Lappas et al. 2018; Bonsón et al. 2017; Guillamón et al. 2016; Mergel 2013). This is partly based on the view that social media's wide coverage helps to influence public knowledge, beliefs and actions on crucial political topics (see Stier et al. 2018; Lietz et al. 2014). A second positive view is the use of social media in crises communication including for sharing knowledge while reducing risk, especially in public emergencies (Alexander 2014; Kim and Liu 2012; Graham et al. 2015; Hagen et al. 2018). Within this framing, social media offers a cheaper alternative to communicate risk and public emergencies to a wider audience especially when physical contact is impossible or mandatorily restricted (see Coman et al. 2021; Osei-Appiah 2021). In Ghana, the ongoing digitalization of local government provides the essential backdrop to analyse local level communication in the context of the COVID-19 public emergency.

Ghana is among the few African countries that have consistently decentralized their political structures allowing locally elected councillors and mayors to decide on local political issues. Ghana enjoys international credibility as it passes for a good example of democratic governance (Crawford 2009; Sabbi 2020; Osei 2015). At the municipal level of government, District Assemblies[3] enjoy the constitutional right to evolve autonomous local policies. Their decisions are often communicated to the local population via elected councillors or via traditional government communication channels (e.g. local radio stations and districts' public relations offices). However, digital media communication is on the rise and its enormous potential for local government communication is barely exhausted. The digitalization of municipal administrations was externally supported to enhance local revenue management (see Addo et al. 2016).[4] Yet, it can be used for communication in situations of crisis, and political messages can be distributed widely at lower costs, to name but a few advantages. Risks such as the entanglement of political and public spheres (Lachapelle and Maarek 2015; Srinivasan et al. 2019), the deflection of political realities, and the ease to demonize political opponents through false information (Coman et al. 2021) seem not to outweigh the generally positive view of social media use.

Our empirical data examines the political communication strategies of three districts namely Kumasi, New Juaben[5] and Wa East. These are part of a broader research project[6] and represent both the major geographical regions and the three official categories of districts. Kumasi in central Ghana is one of the few metropolitan districts with a strong economy and telecommunication

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[3] This designates the geographic precinct where the council exercises political control. Districts comprise large metropolitan, mid-size municipal, and ordinary district authorities. Given the overlap between geography and political structure, we use district and local government interchangeably.

[4] Two key initiatives are GIZ's ongoing software development support to automate districts' billing, collection and monitoring of property taxes and business licences (Addo et al. 2016, p. 16). The Africa Smart Towns Network initiative by the *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD) supports the use of digital solutions in governance, revenue mobilization and urban transportation (AFD 2020).

[5] Since 2019, the municipal district has split into North and South. We cautiously keep it as a unitary district in order to avoid confusion with our already collected fieldwork data preceding the split.

[6] They are part of our case study districts for the ongoing research "'In the shadows of autonomy': Decentralization, municipal decision-makers and local contexts in Ghana and Rwanda" funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). This underpins the comparison with data from the earlier research.

infrastructure. New Juaben in southern Ghana is a mid-size urban district. It has a reasonable digital infrastructure and is within a commuting distance from the national capital. Wa East in northern Ghana is not only rural, but one of the most deprived districts. Among others, roads and telecommunication networks are largely missing. Still, all three district administrations have a functioning social media account. The contrasting district features cushion against contingent biases in the analysis of real and perceived benefits of social media in local political communication. Despite all the digital initiatives, the social media platforms of local administrations in Ghana are very new; many of them having only started between 2018 and 2019.[7] At the time of writing, a large majority of the 260 municipal governments were yet to operate a functioning social media platform for public engagement (see Appendix II).
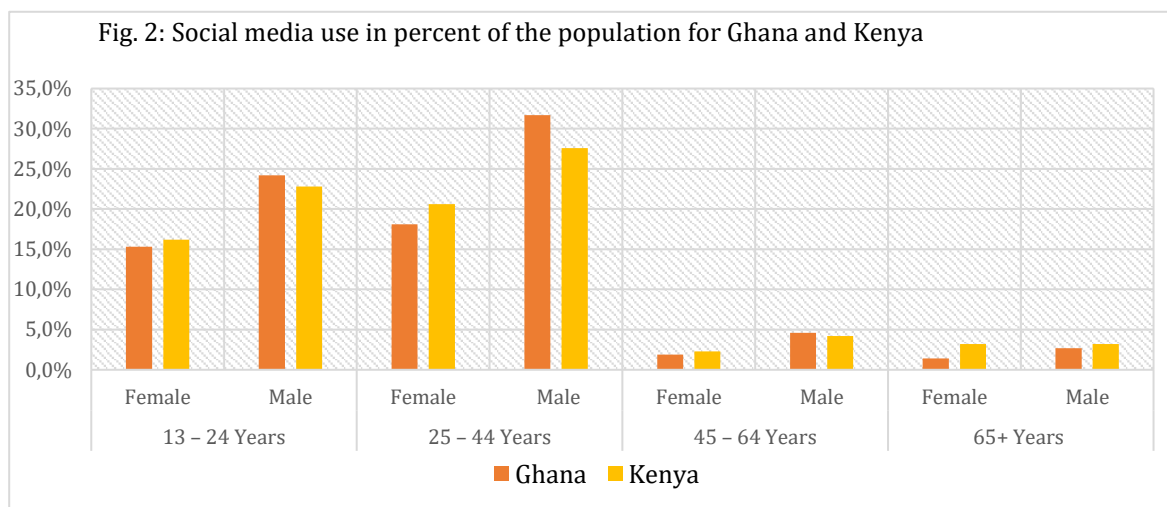
Strikingly, the We Are Social and Hootsuite's Global Digital Report 2020 reveals a continuing trend of Ghanaians staying even longer hours online than in most African countries (Kemp 2020). Ghana was placed ninth globally in 2019 with regard to the average number of hours spent online. Twitter's Jack Dorsey recently announced establishing Africa's Twitter Headquarters in Ghana underlining the country's emergent position in the global digital economy (see Dorsey 2021). It is therefore helpful to situate Ghana from a regional perspective. Ghana's competitive edge in the use of the internet and social media relative to its population is evident when compared with the oft-cited 'digital innovation hubs' and 'silicon savannah' of Kenya and Rwanda (see Ndemo and Weiss 2017; Omanga 2019). Strikingly, just a few Rwandans (under 5%) are active social media users as compared to 20% of Ghana's population and 17% in Kenya. General internet access is higher with similar differences (Ghana, 48%; Kenya, 43%; Rwanda, 26%; see Figure 1), despite Rwanda's digital innovation drive.

Source: Authors' rendition of data compiled by We Are Social and Hootsuite (Kemp 2020)

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[7] For our case study: Wa East (January 23, 2018), New Juaben (North: June 24, 2019; South August 29, 2018), Kumasi (Dec 14, 2018; revamped April 27, 2019).

Less surprisingly, Figure 2 confirms that young people use social media more than older residents and that the usage is gendered in favour of men. Of course, Rwanda is not represented because its social media data is not categorized according to age and gender, given that just a fraction of the population (≈ 1%) actively uses social media. In any case, the smaller gender gap in Kenya demonstrates that Ghana is not in the lead of social media use across all sections of society, which most likely also applies to geographic spaces as the national average figures do not reveal the rural-urban divide.

Fig. 2: Social media use in percent of the population for Ghana and Kenya

Source: Authors' rendition of data compiled by We Are Social and Hootsuite (Kemp 2020)

In Ghana, extant discussions suggest that social media as a platform for local political communication took shape quite recently particularly through the nudging of Ghana's two main political parties, namely the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC). These political parties first deployed social media for their campaign events only in 2016 (see Dzisah 2018; Boateng et al. 2020; Dzisah 2020). Despite prioritizing their parties' activities, there is a possible cascading effect as regime-appointed mayors try to mimic their party's digital activities in the local arena. A probable scenario is that given mayors' unmatched political power (Crawford 2009; Sabbi 2017), they may effectively use the districts' digital platforms to promote their party's interest or their own agendas.

In any case, the communication relevance of these platforms depends not only on the interest of officials who use social media as means of political information and communication but also on citizens' access to both digital technology and internet infrastructure. Emergent studies on access and adaption of digital technology point to a slow but increasing uptake of smartphones and internet among rural households (Twumasi et al. 2021; Siaw et al. 2020). The reasons for poor internet use in rural locations are quite straightforward and part of the digital inequality toolkit: economic inequality, and thus affordability of smartphones, poor network connectivity, lack of electricity and digital literacy skills. Hence, the long hours of average social media use might refer only to a minority of particularly strong internet users. Nonetheless, we find no systematic data on regional and urban-rural differences in internet use.

3 Empirical Data and Methods

We analyse three strands of data: Facebook posts of the three districts; with a two-year Facebook data posts and reactions between January 2019 and December 2020; a very extensive duration compared with most extant studies. Data collection took place from September 2020 to May 2021. A germane reason for choosing Facebook is that it is not a messenger or *chatApp* (i.e., a closed platform such as WhatsApp). While Facebook and Twitter are social media applications ideally suited to our research goals, Facebook was the dominant, active and publicly-available platform in Ghana. Consistent with emerging trends elsewhere (Haro-de-Rosario et al. 2018; Mergel 2013; Hughes et al. 2012), Ghanaian district authorities mainly use Facebook to communicate with the local public. However, Facebook is not easily amenable to web-scraping techniques for downloading data. Consequently, data was collected through the laborious *screen scraping* technique, which only copies pixels displayed on the screen.[8] Culled data were entered into the MAXQDA software for a thorough content analysis of official posts and reactions they generate from the local population. We only use information from official public social media channels. Private conversations on the same platforms were not included.[9] Mostly, we did not have access to non-public posts. We analysed the content of official posts under two headings. First, we coded the content of the posts and the reactions they exact from the local population. Second, we analysed the codes based on the intended functions of the posts (coding details in Appendix I) as well as the type and quality of comments the posts generate.

We are cognizant of existing studies on social media in local governments that prioritize communication strategies in their coding strategies (see Lappas et al. 2018, p. 9; Bellström et al. 2016, p. 555). Some of these codes appear in disparate forms in our dataset, including information provision and the mobilization of the local population. Also conspicuous is how mayors and councillors use district social media platforms for self-promotion. However, our current perspective differs fundamentally. We are interested in topics communicated and how they change over time, given our basic thesis that the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown measures triggered more social media posts – and potentially intensified the districts' use of social media to reach residents. Given our proposition that local political communication retains a strong analogue component, we complement the social media dataset with existing fieldwork interviews and a short survey. In 2017 and 2018, 83 survey questionnaires were administered in Kumasi (46), New Juaben (25), and Wa East (12) in addition to 31 in-depth interviews with councillors and selected local government agents. We updated the interview data through telephone interviews with four selected councillors in 2021. Additionally, we cross-checked social media posts of the respective district MPs over the same period to find the level of concord or competition.

In any case, we are not oblivious to the potential limitations of our data collection approach and their consequences for our dataset and analysis (see Mayr and Weller 2017, p. 108). At least, we could hardly know the details (including gender, location, and political affiliation) of individuals

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[8] In contrast, web-scraping techniques use bots to extract data and their underlying HTML codes.
[9] This is due to our ethical obligation to include in our data only information in the form of posts or comments to these posts that were available to the public. Statements by local government officials and the public that were intended or restricted to friends (i.e., semi-private or private conversations) were not included in our data.

who regularly reacted to the districts' social media posts. We can at best only speculate on these characteristics. Another challenge regards access restriction to potential district digital platforms. Based on hints from our interviews with elected local officials, it became obvious that active internal communication by district entities was occurring on exclusive social media platforms. Despite our requests, we have not be allowed to access those platforms to this day. Even though this information would be interesting, it is not part of the public communication analysed in this paper. Another noteworthy caveat is that findings from our three case studies must be understood within the broader context of social media use in Ghana's 260 local governments. While a significant majority, 198 (76%) of these local governments owned social media accounts (mainly Facebook), less than half of those local governments (44.4%) had functioning social media platforms for public engagement (see Appendix II).

Importantly, with the exception of a handful of districts with somewhat functioning social media platforms, we find a substantial number of urban and rural districts hurriedly created social media account that they could seldom actively manage. This was noticeable between 2017 and 2019 coinciding with the use of social media for political campaigning by the NPP and NDC. These general trends in social media use fit into two related logics of representation in the manner by which districts adopt, operate and reliably maintain digital communication platforms. First, district authorities adopt social media to seem up-to-date; a strategy akin to the *fashion logic* in the sociological debate on innovations and reform wherein new concepts are adopted only for a couple of years and abandoned in favour of other fashionable concepts (see Abrahamson 1991, 1996; Kühl 2009). Second, local elites use social media for impression management by communicating individual political goals on districts' digital platforms.

4 Social Media at the Local Level: First Empirical Facts from Facebook Posts

We presume that local governments use social media communications in at least three ways: first, to make a positive impression of the services they deliver; second, to encourage the participation of local citizens in district activities; and third, to promote ongoing citizen-district dialogue and feedback on local decisions (Mergel 2013, pp. 127–128; Lappas et al. 2018, pp. 4–5). These general expectations offer a good first glimpse of the empirical observations with regard to the use of social media at the local level. The social media accounts of two of our three districts are among the most active, but they have large differences. The third is hardly active.[10] A count of official posts (Figure 3, p. 9) shows there are many more regular posts in the metropolitan district (Kumasi) compared with both the mid-size urban district (New Juaben) and the rural district (Wa East).

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[10] We evaluate the degree of activity as follows: active = district has posted within the last six months; partially active = district has posted within the previous twelve months; inactive = district's last post is older than a year. Without established typologies available, our categories must remain somewhat arbitrary, but still draw a clear illustration of the quantitative variance in social media use.
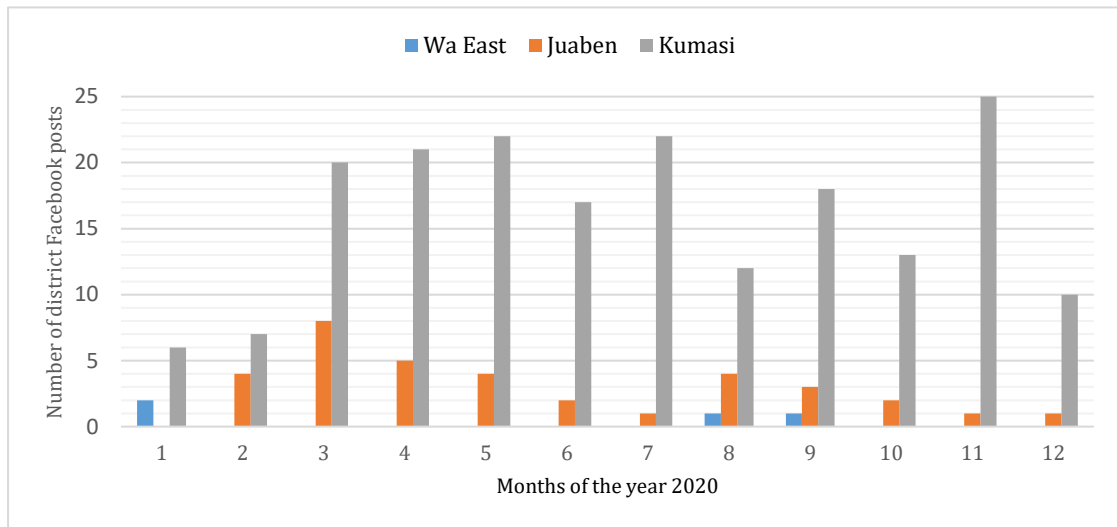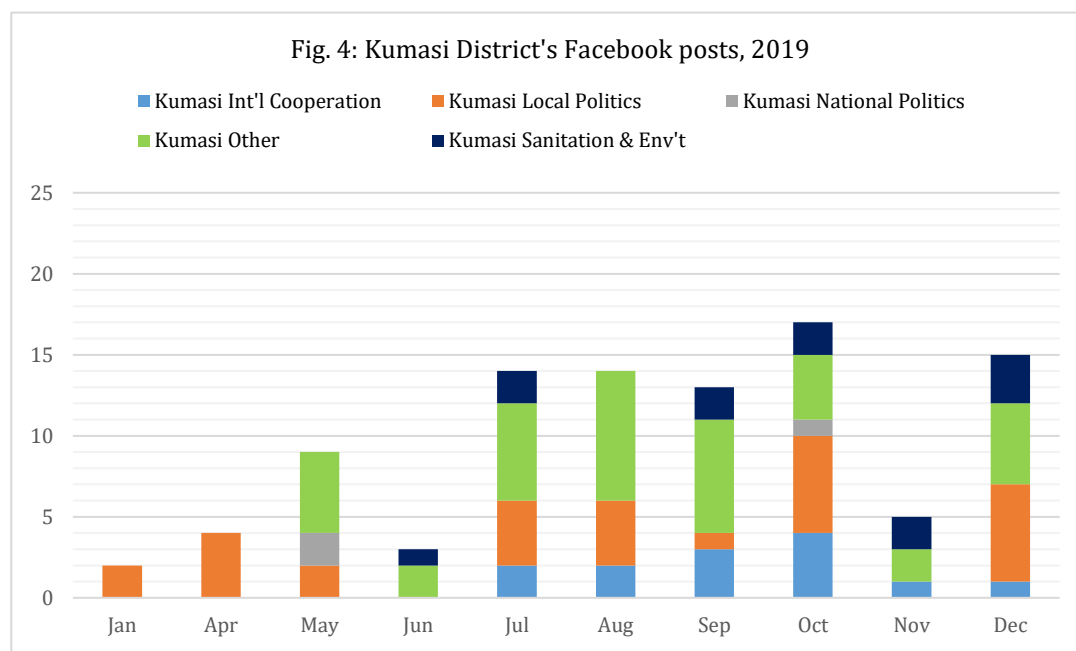
Fig. 3: Facebook posts by district in 2020

Regardless of the relative variations in the number of posts by districts, the rural district of Wa East offers a striking observation. Certainly, the district is a clear outlier in terms of its actual posts vis-à-vis the higher than average reactions to posts. Despite the highly parsimonious use of its social media platform, the few municipal posts attracted by far the highest response rate (84.6% in 2019; and 100% in 2020) compared with both the mid-size urban New Juaben (4.0% in 2019; and 34.3% in 2020) and the metropolitan Kumasi (27.4% in 2019 and 46.6% in 2020). Posts in both 2019 and 2020 bear this out. It is evident that social media is used differently in the three districts. The rural district hardly uses social media. The difference between the city and mid-size municipality may also be a consequence of the limited public issues to communicate. But we could only generalize if we had more data about the number of posts, drawn from a representative and stratified set of districts. In any case, we note the particular use of district social media platforms beyond *photo-ops* per se. They serve as an outlet for mobilizing public action but also point to indicators of openness and transparency. In New Juaben in 2019, for instance, we observed posts of infrastructural projects as they progress from inception through completion. Again, between January and March, the district's social media platform was inundated with information seeking to mobilize local public action, particularly into clean-up exercises although the posts seldom received public reactions. These posts may indicate concrete civic engagement with the local population. They also might be subtle efforts to present the district as transparent and accountable to the local public.

In local governments of advanced democracies, social media is often deployed to communicate important information in crises, including national catastrophic events such as earthquakes and flooding (Graham et al. 2015; Hagen et al. 2018; Alexander 2014). The generally fewer district posts in our data constrain a critical analysis of the crisis communication functions of these platforms, especially with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent restrictions. Nonetheless, the still limited official social media posts from the metropolitan district of Kumasi offer a possibility to track changes in topics communicated over time. Thus, we can evaluate the district's communication priorities by comparing posts prior to the pandemic with those during
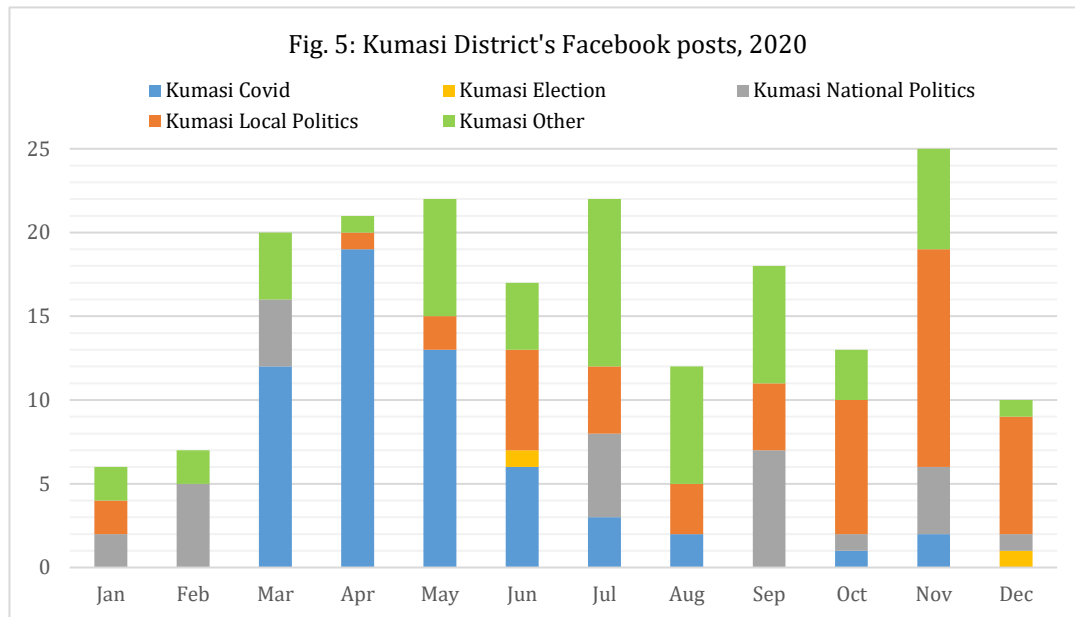
the active months of COVID-19 to uncover particular topics that gained new focus and those that went out of sight.

4.1 District Social Media and Crisis Communication: Is There a COVID-19 Effect?

Following our argument that COVID-19 may trigger more social media posts by the municipal governments, it is helpful first to explore how much of the changes in the posts could be attributed to COVID-19. Starting with Kumasi's[11] official posts for 2019 (see Figure 4) reveal as much the most relevant topics for the district focused on local political issues. The new topics on health from March 2020, together with an increasing number of posts indicate the significance of the pandemic through the lens of the district officials (see Figure 5, p.11), but the COVID-19 momentum was not sustained. That is more striking given the hike in other topics in Kumasi posts in July 2020. Insights from the 2019 data show that the month of July is hardly a peak period for official posts. Hence, we can safely speculate that the high number of non-pandemic posts by mid-2020 might be linked to a backlog of thematic issues that were delayed because of the pandemic. Alternatively, district officials churned out these posts as part of attempts to create a positive impression of the local government being in control of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, it is clear that COVID-19 changed the communication strategy of the districts. We see a dramatic shift to (and suspension of) different topics that correspond to COVID-19 related lockdown scenarios globally.

Fig. 4: Kumasi District's Facebook posts, 2019

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[11] Note the clearly fewer posts by the New Juaben and Wa East districts.

Fig. 5: Kumasi District's Facebook posts, 2020

As will become evident in subsequent sections, pre-pandemic social media posts barely referenced health as a pressing priority on the district's digital platform – save for a few references to the commissioning of health infrastructure in the district. However, by mid-March 2020, health had become an overarching topic on the districts' social media platform, second only to local politics in frequency. This might nominally confirm the relevance of social media applications in crisis communication. Paradoxically for Ghanaian local governments, the overall limited number of posts and public reactions appeared to undermine the much-touted attribute and promised efficiency of social media to target a larger audience. In particular, this might question the use of social media to communicate important information to populations that are the focus of contact restrictions in times of social and natural emergencies.

Nevertheless, one intriguing topic that entered the discussion deserves mention, even if it attracted few official posts. International development cooperation goals (including climate change, SGDs, Smart Cities, and development assistance) formed just over seven percent of total posts in 2019 and six percent in 2020. However, international cooperation goals rarely appeared in our conversations with elected officials as part of their everyday pressing priorities. From our experiences with official reactions to such topics (see Sabbi 2017; Sabbi and Stroh 2020), we can assume that district officials view demonstrable progress on international cooperation goals as worthy of public attention because they boost the district's legitimacy locally while ensuring the flow of external financial support that would augment local resources.

4.2 Public Engagement With Municipal Entities: Commentary and Reactions to Official Posts

Social media as a political communication platform transcends mere impressions of service delivery in district arenas or the legitimation of districts as accountable and responsive political entities. At least, in the sense of or civic engagement of citizens in programmes of decentralized

authorities (see Mohammed 2013; Graham et al. 2015; Guillamón et al. 2016; Lappas et al. 2018), the adoption and uptake of social media for political communication purportedly fills the participatory gap in local policymaking, particularly in emerging democracies of the Global South. As a platform for political communication, the contents of Facebook posts and commentary generated help us gauge the nature of interaction and citizens' assessment of the platforms' effectiveness. Reactions to official posts (including comments, likes, shares and replies) form the basis of ongoing analysis of citizens' commitment and engagement with local government authorities. For our current focus on political communication as an interactive exchange of ideas and concerns, we conceive reaction as the wider term and comprises a commentary when a post receives any (written) comment. In that sense, we disregard other reactions such as likes and shares. Comments that generate or further comments (i.e. replies) constitute a discussion.

These reactions are often taken as "indicators of dialogue and feedback" between the government and the governed (Bonsón et al. 2017; Haro-de-Rosario et al. 2018). Social media applications promise an efficient and less-costly platform for a wider audience to engage in (participatory) dialogue. They are expected to engender political efficacy when citizens are encouraged to participate and comment in both online and offline public discussions and decisions that affect them the most. In the current case, the posts and reactions they elicit appear far less compelling (see Table 1). Indeed, more than half of the posts received no comments at all. For posts that receive comments, we observe, based on social media profiles, some individuals who regularly react to official posts (we revisit these individuals later). The less intensive activity begs the question of whether Facebook and social media applications, in general, are truly a platform for political debate in Ghana. We are aware that this trend might change in the future since the data in the table shows an incremental rise in districts' posts and comments between 2020 and 2019.

Table 1. Number of Facebook Posts With and Without Comments, 2019-2020

District/ Year		Facebook Posts		
		Commented	Not Commented	Total
Kumasi	2019	23	61	84
	2020	90	103	193
New Juaben	2019	4	94	98
	2020	12	23	35
Wa East	2019	11	2	13
	2020	4	-	4
Total	2019	38	157	195
	2020	106	126	232

Source: Authors' tabulation of districts' Facebook posts
Note: Comments are any written reactions to a post, but not 'likes' or recommendations.

Regardless of the generally fewer official posts and the limited reactions to those posts, we observe a burgeoning public interest in district social media posts (as illustrated in Figure 6). For example, in 2019 a nominal 38 (19.5%) of the 195 district posts received reactions from the local

public. These posts attracted diverse commentaries suggesting an ongoing intensification of reactions and debates, with a total count of ninety commentaries.
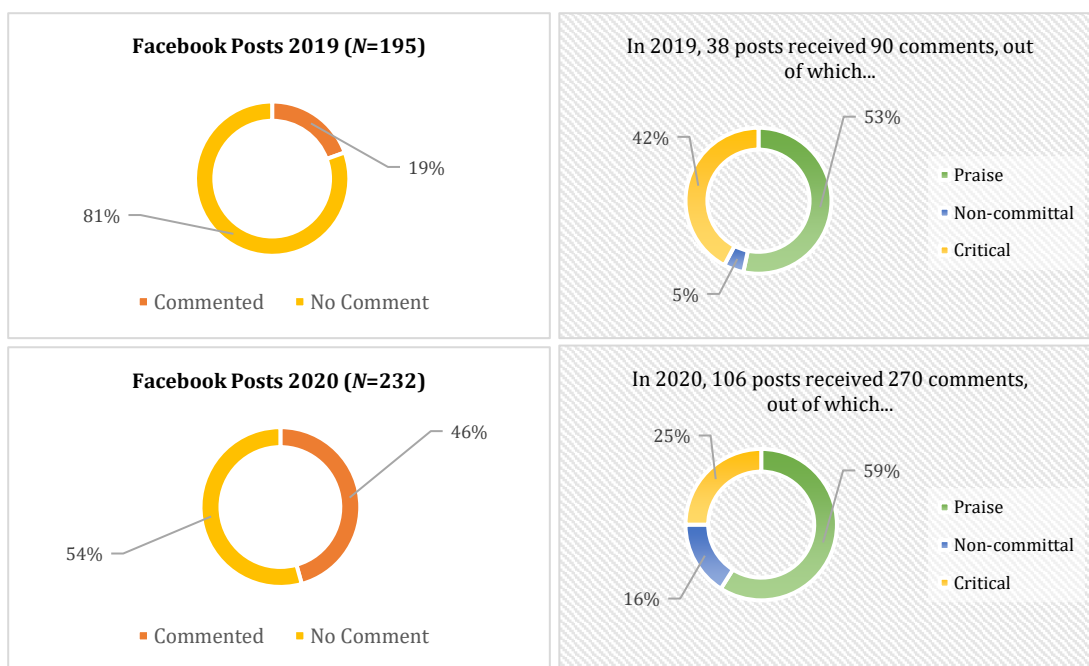

Fig. 6: Comments and reactions to posts in all three districts in 2019 and 2020

These reactions (i.e., comments and discussions) ranged from positive, non-committal to negative evaluations of the information on activities and services delivered by their local government.[12] We make similar observations in 2020 where almost half (45.7%) of the 232 posts attracted public reactions with as many as 270 commentaries recorded on the posts. Thus, some form of open discussion occurs on these public platforms. The seeming momentum in the rising number of commentaries may suggest a positive engagement in the sense of an emerging debate between district authorities and local citizens. These reactions deserve some detailed reflections. A first careful look at the content (i.e., quality) of reactions reveals that an overwhelming majority of the commentaries mostly showered praise on the mayors and district officials for performing their public functions. This was particularly striking in 2020 when posts with politics-laced contents (e.g., elections and local council activities) elicited the largest amount of responses and the highest compliments.

A few examples on this point are helpful. Reactions by commentators in Kumasi such as "Kumasi is indeed clean. I know that for sure" and "KMA on the achievement of this fete [sic]. Do not however relent" (Kumasi Metro Assembly 2019a) followed the city's receipt of external funds to support sanitation but they also reflect a trend of commentaries on most of the posts by the district. Again, "God will take him to places because of his selfless and dedication and humility more blessings ahead" (Kumasi Metro Assembly 2020b) was among the many commendations

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[12] Praise: very positive and complimentary comments; Critical: critique offering doubts and ability to deliver results; Non-committal: comments that are indifferent and those that detract from the topic posted.

the mayor received to mark his third year in office. In New Juaben, "You're blessed chief" (New Juaben Municipal Assembly 2019a) and "Good work but please check the date on the first line. Thanks" (New Juaben Municipal Assembly 2020a) are the typical reactions to official posts informing residents of a clean-up exercise or the implementation of infection control measures, respectively. Similarly, in Wa East, "That's good work done by the Hon DCE and staff" (Wa East District Assembly 2019) or "Congrats all Hon. Unit Committee Members and Councillors of Wa East District. I pray and hope you give your best to the people of Wa East. My best wishes" (Wa East District Assembly 2020b), were characteristic responses to posts showing the delivery of education materials or the inauguration of district councils.

With the onset of the pandemic in 2020, we observe a substantial number of health-related commentaries (both complimentary and critical) come in from COVID-19 related posts. This is clear evidence that, at least in major cities, some people used the district's social media platform to augment their sources of information on the pandemic. Table 2 shows the major topics posted on social media that attracted significant comments and the type of commentary residents provided. These include politics and election (46.3%); health including COVID-19 (28.5%); and education (10.4%). Based on these commentaries, one could reasonably assume that residents would align their comments with topics in social media posts that are most relevant to them. That assertion is statistically insignificant,[13] which is an indication that the type/quality of comment does not work as an indicator of relevance per se. The mere act of commenting seems relevant enough for the commentators. Hence, we can speculate that the rise in health-related posts, as well as the critical comments they attracted, are a natural consequence of citizens' reacting to contact restrictions arising from the impositions of the COVID-19 pandemic measures.

Table 2. Topical Issues on Social Media and Quality of Commentary in 2020

Quality of comment	Number of comments per post *Share of topical comments per quality level*					
	Politics & elections	Health	(thereof COVID-19)	Education	Other*	Total
Critical	28 *22%*	26 *34%*	(24) *(36%)*	4 *14%*	11 *28%*	69 *26%*
Non-committal	16 *13%*	11 *14%*	(8) *(12%)*	4 *14%*	12 *30%*	43 *16%*
Praise	81 *65%*	40 *52%*	(35) *(52%)*	20 *71%*	17 *43%*	158 *59%*
Total	**125**	**77**	**(67)**	**28**	**40**	**270**

Sources: Authors' tabulation. *others include roads and safety; market and revenue; sanitation; sports; and culture & entertainment.

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[13] The Chi-square test ($\chi 2$) checking for an association between topical issues posted (politics and elections, health, and education) and the quality of commentary (praise, critical, and non-committal) returned insignificant result: $\chi 2$ (*df*=4, *N*=230) =5.86, *p*=.21, phi= .21. Statistically implied, the quality of comments is not significantly associated with the topic of the original post. However, given the relatively small number of observations in the statistical test, it is worth mentioning that the highest *share* of critical comments in 2020 is associated with COVID-19 posts.

Indeed, excerpts from citizens' reactions to the COVID-19 containment measures were indicative of municipal authorities' lack of awareness of non-existent waste collection infrastructure. As one commentary in New Juaben noted: "Kantudu is filled with filth after the container was carried away [...]. Do something about it, we're not in normal times to be doing this" (New Juaben Municipal Assembly 2020b). Other commentaries used the imposition of COVID-19 measures as a pretext to point out local elites' ineptitude, generally. A commentator in Kumasi fumed: "you are using the COVID-19 [pandemic] to cover your incompetence" and in the process triggered other commentaries including "Our streets have been taken over by hawkers [...] people build anyhow without regard for planning and zoning. And all we do is sit for meetings to discuss about what?" (Kumasi Metro Assembly 2020c).

Taken as a whole, the few available commentaries on official posts indicate that residents generally tend to shower praises on the district elites and national political topics and offer a far less critical assessment of the ordinary services provided by the municipal governments. But careful analysis reveals a few instances such commentaries might pass for critical assessment from the population. Only a handful of posts in Kumasi and New Juaben elicited such intensive reactions. What is striking is how these comments compel reactions from both co-commentators and district authorities, a scenario analogous to real dialogue and debate. An August 2019 post is illustrative. When a visiting Israeli delegation raised investment prospects in agriculture in Kumasi, some citizens unenthused with the city's broader environmental management swiftly charged the mayor's office to come clear on these commitments. A commentator asked officials to clarify when they would "start planting trees inside Kumasi to bring shade and to beautify the city [because] There are no trees in the city which has exposed the citizens to direct sunshine" " (Kumasi Metro Assembly 2019b). This comment forced a response from the mayor's office, which clarified that:

> [P]ls on the tree planting exercise KMA has planted 2152 since January 2019 to date, its visible all over [...] Sir, on the issue of darkness in the towns mentioned by u.. the Electrical Unit of KMA has begun repairs and maintenance work on street lights (sic) and those communities would be attended to" (Kumasi Metro Assembly 2019b).

A more compelling case is when a recently renovated 520 seating-capacity town hall was opened to the public in Kumasi on December 18, 2019 – a facility whose sheer cost triggered several critical comments and forced an official response:

> Earlier today the Metro Chief Executive, Hon. Osei Assibey Antwi together with a team of Senior Officers inspected the Prempeh Assembly Hall. The facility, now open to the public has 520 customised chairs , 2 Centralised industrial air conditioners, an acoustic ceiling, basement and 3 renovated offices, cafeteria, waiting room and canopy. #WhereGhanaHappens (Kumasi Metro Assembly 2019c)

Among others, the presumed high cost of the facility provoked several highly critical comments, a selection of these include: "completely disappointed in Kma [municipal council]. Next time do the right time. How much did you waste on the renovation? With this capacity, Was the renovation

necessary at all"; He [mayor] is visionless"; and "disappointing. Kma is myopic". The magnitude of the criticisms forced the mayor's office to respond:

> thanks for taken [sic] time to visit and like our page. However your concern is on the heart of the Mayor and he has been working on it and he particularly takes the interest to tell investors and development partners to consider that area or better still partner local agents" (Kumasi Metro Assembly 2019c)

The ensuing *debate* went beyond the assumed inefficiency in the management of district financial resources. It also included intricate details about the city's ever-increasing population, which will inevitably require ample space for public events. Others wished officials could imagine a more glorifying edifice to match the city's historical legacy. These less than flattering commentaries and official responses were largely borderline cases. However, the fact that people raise them begs an important question of the individuals who might show greater courage to offer highly critical commentaries bearing in mind the political repercussions that could ensue from their actions. A few Individuals who we may call 'dedicated commentators' seem to be the main actors behind commentaries. Some background knowledge on these people including their political goals and aspirations, and whether their reactions are borne out of a duty of care for the 'public good' would be analytically interesting. Although their identity and political affiliation could be unmasked, these dedicated commentators felt at ease to publicly react and voice their disaffection with district authorities. It is possible to speculate that these commentators may be highly-connected individuals or those outside the mayors' sphere of influence.[14] This boldness also marks a clear contradiction with the reasoning of the majority of commentators who tend to shower hefty praises on the mayors and district officials on similar posts.

A review of the platforms of the districts' MPs shows non-existent and inactive accounts and those with parsimonious posts. The limited information often relates to their party and national political issues, particularly MPs' re-election activities. This differs from the communication priorities of district officials. Additionally, if we consider the use of social media as means for political communication, in the broader sense, we hardly find posts that offer strong political statements (e.g., Trump's Twitter posts) that often seek to attack and undermine political opponents, or those that present strong opinions in the political debates. It seems ironic that the publicness and unrestricted access of district digital platforms are not attractive enough to draw the local population to engage with municipal authorities. This observation leads to an important point on the use of social media in general. Analysis of the limited reaction to official social media posts has to be nuanced because the mere fact of unrestricted accessibility to official platforms could act as a double-edged sword. Citizens may expect that someone would comment on public social media platforms. Others would ordinarily hesitate to respond or comment on information posted on publicly accessible social media platforms, especially if they feel their identity might be compromised. In the case of Facebook, even legal remedies against this risk rarely assuage individuals' fear of political consequences. Dwyer et al. (2019, pp. 108–109) narrate Sierra Leone residents' preference for specific social media platforms and how they avoid others that purport to betray users' identities because of platform requirements for background details that reveal

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[14] One of the highly critical comments urging the Kumasi mayor to "update the phone number on your profile, Asantes in the diaspora would love to call and advice you" suggest some of the critical commentators follow local government policies from outside of the country (Kumasi Metro Assembly 2019b).

regional and ethnic identities. Such people were wary that those identity markers could be used to censure the veracity of their public political statements. We could infer that those Ghanaians commentators, who offer highly critical views on the activities of their district officials, do so by disguising their real identities. Our initial assessment reveals that some have taken to hiding behind widely used first and second names, which are difficult to differentiate between.

This practice is prevalent even in advanced democracies despite their well-defined political freedoms. Scholars view the use of anonymous identities online as a consequential reaction to being identified with their political positions and preferences (Lane 2020; Thorson 2014; Zuckerman 2014; Weinstein 2014). Although social media in Uganda is positively viewed as an emergent platform for political deliberation (Muzee et al. 2020), President Museveni recently urged the police "to quickly locate and arrest" social media users who purportedly spread false information about him (Museveni 2021). This is clear evidence of political consequences that have the tendency to compel social media users to hide their real identities. This risk of exposure might be direct (should they use their full name) or indirect because an active Facebook account offers hints on one's identity and, at least, Facebook friends would be aware of their friends' nicknames. Beyond the privacy concerns, we must think of social media as only a part of (or even a mere auxiliary) to the broad spectrum of political communication possibilities available in local arenas of developing countries. As discussed earlier, the number of official posts by the districts remains surprisingly limited except for Kumasi. The same is true for the number of commentators. Therefore, a modest approach is to desist from viewing social media as the only reality while considering communication that takes place in the analogue world – we return to this point later. Whether citizens would react to the information posted by their local government depends, to a large extent, on how much that information matters in their lives. Hence, we now analyse the content of information that district officials post on their social media platforms.

5 Local political priorities: social media and interviews data compared

Local governments have explicit political functions but also face normative expectations to deliver responsive and transformational services. If we follow the conventional view that social media is a platform for communicating politically relevant information and responsive services, we would expect to find congruence of political priorities that local representatives reported in face-to-face interviews and those priorities posted on social media platforms. At least, one can assume that social media platforms are used to at least communicate the most important issues.

5.1 Congruence of political priorities? Interview and social media data compared

Considering the high share of positive commentaries on official posts discussed earlier, one gets the impression that citizens find municipal services responsive. However, the rather low absolute number of posts questions the reliability of such conclusions. We thus cross-checked the convergence of pressing demands from the local populations as reported by their elected officials in interviews against the topics that feature on official social media platforms (see Table 3; or the alternative depiction in Appendix III). Table 3 compares pressing local topics addressed in Facebook posts from 2019 and 2020 – thus, from before and after the outbreak of the pandemic –

with those topics mentioned in interviews in 2017/2018, and thus also covers posts before and during COVID-19.

Table 3. Comparing Local Priorities as Reported in Interviews and on Social Media

District	Communication Channel	Health (thereof COVID-19)	Sanitation	Education	Safety, roads & drains[15]	Livelihood support	Politics & elections
Kumasi	Interviews 2017-18	19 (∅)	36	27	31	11	-
	Facebook 2019	2 (∅)	12	3	8	-	45
	Facebook 2020	65 (58)	19	14	13	-	81
New Juaben	Interviews 2017-18	11 (∅)	13	18	15	11	-
	Facebook 2019	4 (∅)	21	18	-	-	37
	Facebook 2020	19 (15)	1	2	-	-	17
Wa East	Interviews 2017-18	9 (∅)	6	31	6	9	-
	Facebook 2019	0 (∅)	-	4	-	-	9
	Facebook 2020	0 (0)	-	-	-	-	4
Total	Interviews 2017-18	39 (∅)	55	56	52	31	-
	Facebook 2019	6 (∅)	33	25	8	-	91
	Facebook 2020	84 (73)	20	16	13	-	16

Source: Authors' field data and Facebook posts; Note: numbers report the frequencies of interviews and posts on the respective topics. Interview frequencies are based on 83 interviews in which multiple topics have been addressed. The categories are driven by topics raised in the interviews. The COVID-19 pandemic became a worldwide matter of concern in early 2020. That is why we indicate the non-existence of the topic before 2020 using ∅ instead of 0 (zero).

The available data suggests that there is no or very limited congruence.[16] The topics vary widely, both between interview reports and social media posts, as well as across districts. Councillors tended to report education, sanitation and infrastructural issues as central priorities. Even when these topics were also often mentioned in Facebook posts, the official Facebook posts had a clear focus on politics– both local and national). All other topics together accounted for fewer posts than politics and elections in 2019. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, attention shifts to health in the

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[15] The interview category was "roads & drains" whereas the Facebook category was "safety & roads".

[16] We are mindful of differences in the timing of the interviews (2017 and 2018), and the social media data (2019 and 2020). We do not interpret the Facebook posts as a one-to-one indicator for issues reported in interviews. But there is some overlap. When we disregard the effect of COVID-19 in Kumasi and New Juaben, the three most important issues reported in interviews and Facebook posts are sanitation, education and safety/roads.

2020 posts, without politics and elections losing their primary importance for the local administration. Developments with regard to other topics vary across districts. Kumasi's official Facebook activities increased remarkably, also pulling up the number of reports about such topics as sanitation and education whereas New Juaben's official Facebook page saw less than half the number of entries in 2020 than in the previous year and hardly reported anything else than health and electoral politics. Wa East continued its virtual silence on Facebook. In sum, social media does not reliably mirror the daily realities and challenges in the districts.

Take the case of Wa East, where elected councillors point to the road network and healthcare infrastructure as the most important priorities. Indeed, there is no hospital in the district save for the few church-run health centres, and citizens endure grave difficulties commuting since paved roads are rare. Similarly, a significant number of councillors from peri-urban areas of New Juaben travelled long distances under terrible road conditions to reach the district council. Still, no references to the roads and healthcare infrastructure appeared on the districts' social media communications. Not a single post on the official New Juaben and Wa East accounts broached road conditions in 2019 or 2020. What might explain this remarkable incongruence of issues raised in interview statements and Facebook posts? One must consider the councillors' overall influence in the local government. They mainly act as representatives of the local people and their everyday needs, whereas the administration manages the social media platform and decides what is worthy of public knowledge and "pick and post on the district's social media platform" (Councillor, Kumasi on February 17, 2021). Hence, the primary focus on success, activities, and local regulations in the districts' posts. Pointing to unsolved problems would be an act of self-criticism, whereas social media communication seems to be primarily reserved for self-promotion.

Organized party opposition does not exist at the local level; hence, no opposition structures systematically fill the gap in addressing unsolved issues. Rarely do citizens themselves successfully use social media to put pressure on the administration. One exceptional case was when residents not only criticized the expensive renovation of the Kumasi Town Hall but also named other needs and eventually forced an official response. More often, local elites create and manage incongruent priorities, which underscores our critique that social media communication should not be mistaken for the dominant platform of relevant political information.

5.2 Limited Role of Social Media in Political Communication

So far, we observed, firstly, a rather low frequency of using public social media channels for official communication. Secondly, there is an overlap of political priorities as reported in face-to-face interviews and suggested priorities on official Facebook accounts. At first glance, this might suggest a weak (digital) engagement between local governments and their citizens. However, a closer look suggests different realities. At the helm of executive power, district mayors and strong councillors are well-positioned to use social media for self-promotion. At least in Kumasi, some councillors frequently appear in official posts together with the mayor. Appearance at both official and more mundane events might give the impression that district elites self-promote their private political goals via official social media. One reason for this phenomenon is the persistent problem with access to both smartphones and the internet for many ordinary residents. This was apparent in remarks by councillors:

> If you do not have an Android phone and all those phones, how do you receive information on social media? So it [social media] is good for the elites … but to come to the locality, the [community] information centers are very central in giving information out … We have a lot of people who handle the phone but they don't even know anything about [it] so the social media how does it affect [them]? (Councillor, New Juaben on February 16, 2021)

This observation demonstrates a key point. Despite the increasing penetration of internet and phone usage in Ghana, the core problem with the limited use of social media transcends accessibility to phones and its digital divide. Among the well-known inhibitions is the problem of digital literacy (Tuwei 2021), which compounds the already fraught access to social media platforms. Together, these restrictions exclude a large segment of the population from operating mobiles phones and discussions on social media platforms.

Even more telling, our empirical data reveals that much of the selective posts on Facebook were aimed at the eyes of the outside world vis-à-vis a representation of their responsive services or an invitation for a concrete political debate. With regard to the already mentioned preferences of key district actors (e.g., mayors and councillors) enhancing the self-perception via social media posts, we need to accept that elected local officials' appearances in public events — they are obliged to participate anyway — always have an element of self-promotion. However, there are examples that point more or less exclusively to the mayors themselves. There are very mundane posts such as "The Humble MCE [mayor]" (New Juaben Municipal Assembly 2019b) or others that attempt to project a *new* image of mayors and councillors as fundamentally different from the regular selfish politician. One official post noted that politicians are "self-seeking, self-perpetuating and self-aggrandizing cabals" and urged "political office holders to reflect on the sacrifices of our forebears and be modest, selfless and above all, God fearing" (Kumasi Metro Assembly 2020a). Further, a handful of posts on the inauguration of district councils and committees craftily drew endorsements and positive comments all the while highlighting to other commentators, the personal standing and achievements of the respective elected officials. The example of Wa East best illustrates this reasoning: "Congratulations!!! Hon Presiding Member, Dr Mahama Suleman K. Ewurah" (Wa East District Assembly 2020a).

By deploying the official social media platforms this way, mayors and elected officials simply present themselves as responsible politicians and attempt to use the same to persuade and curry favour of the electorates. We cannot even be sure that the posts primarily address the local population. Instead, although speculative, high-ranking politicians, the political party, national government, development organizations, and the diaspora could be the real target. One councillor concurred that essentially, "they [district] are just showing it [social media posts] to the world" since "some of the [local] people would not even know that something has happened" (Councillor, New Juaben on February 16, 2021). It is telling how social media in closed chat-groups cater to the interest of local elites and elected officials. One councillor openly stated that:

> "[S]ometimes, we just discuss problems affecting our work and how best we can solve them; that is just for the Assembly's activities and our [councillors'] own welfare; yes that is it [...] the information provided on WhatsApp is meant for honourable members." (Councillor, Wa East, on February 17, 2021)

In view of the emergent distinction between social media as a semi-confidential space for elected officials and selected societal actors vis-à-vis being the officially-dedicated digital space for political communication, we need to rethink presumptions of the *public* behind local governments' social media platforms. There is a clear overlap between public, semi-public, and private social media platforms. The statements of councillors remind us of the characterization and different uses for official social media platforms. In fact, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and blogs may be entirely public or partly public (for Facebook and Instagram); the accountholders decide whether posts are public or restricted to *friends*. The communication with friends on Facebook and Instagram is often private or, depending on the number of friends, semi-public. The same holds true for WhatsApp. In this sense, the main difference between public and private becomes blurred. The publicness of a social media platform depends largely on the policy of the account holder to either accept friends or invite others to join their Facebook or WhatsApp groups. In the USA, for example, many private social media users are quite open to make friends or include people in their groups (Lee 2014, p. 31). This differs in the case of local governments. While political communication needs to use public channels, actual political debates may not take place in the public via posts and their associated comments but rather in a private space. We know, for instance, about councillors' restricted WhatsApp groups that are only deployed for internal communication among peers.

Some public agencies are known to use social media to make an impression of being innovative and credible without a clear commitment to engage with the public (Mergel 2013; Lappas et al. 2018). The subtle use of social media for impression management often cares less about the public relevance of issues but more about promoting the individual political goals of elected officials. Superficial impression management might partially explain the local population's reluctance to engage with district authorities on the official social media platforms and risks to enhance apathy vis-à-vis local politics if self-promotion shapes the general perception of administrative reform.

Our observations emphasize the limitations of social media in local governance in Ghana. Social media are mainly channels for selected political priorities and scarcely stimulate more civic engagement or debate on local topics. The interests and preferences of mayors and strong councillors, in particular for self-representation, often dominate public social media channels. The platforms support internal political debates only in private groups. Limited access to smartphones and electricity as well as incomplete network coverage additionally limit the outreach. At the same time, we find that traditional media remains the dominant means of political communication. The districts of New Juaben (mid-size urban) and Wa East (rural) demonstrate that social media is only scarcely used. Most citizens simply do not know that the posts exist.

Regarding political mobilization, social media is only partially used even in larger cities. Access remains limited to major parts of the population and, therefore, other means of political communication defend their primary position. Radio and, to a lesser extent, TV still remain the most influential media for everyday information of both urban and rural citizens (Amponsah 2003, p. 169; Agomor and Obayashi 2008, p. 262; Boateng et al. 2020, p. 228; Dzisah 2018, pp. 33–34; Dzisah 2020, p. 115). Community radio broadcasting – and their phone-in and text messaging programmes – offers a real opportunity for local residents to question mayors and elected officials

about pressing local concerns.[17] Citizens could also voice their opinions on current national discussions (Ugboaja 1979, pp. 42–43; Devas and Grant 2003, p. 312; Kimani 2020, p. 94). Political debates in local governance hardly reached social media platforms. This was a view shared by most councillors in the rural periphery where access to phones and digital infrastructure remains remarkably limited:

> "[Y]ou know the whole of Wa East is a farming community and especially this time they don't have any farming activity. So you happen to meet the youth groups who sit [together] to take their tea [...] you have the opportunity to interact with such groups [...] The other aspect is the church and the mosque where we could have access to a larger group when they meet for prayers [...] in some of the communities where we have the 'Town Criers', we use them [as well as] business people with their [loud] speakers [to] just take your message across." (Councillor, Wa East on February 16, 2021)

> "[S]ome of the times, the information is in posters ...so much as they see the posters and ads, the message gets through ... And there is also this radio programme going on [about] COVID-19 .... before the pandemic, I used personal contacts ... I'll usually go and meet my people ... so they [could directly] contribute to the agenda. So it means that for now, their participation is denied." (Councillor, Wa East on February 17, 2021)

Clearly, local governments' decision to use social media applications for political communication depends on the consideration of their population's unique background characteristics, including locality, economic standing, and access to digital infrastructure. Our empirical data shows that public communication is transforming. Television and newspapers are likely to be leapfrogged as political communication channels. But so far, radio and local communication strategies such as simple gatherings and loudspeaker announcements delivered at central markets and weekly market scenes remain crucial, especially in the rural periphery. In rural areas, announcements by the town crier,[18] personal communication of local councillors in the wards, and radio broadcasts make the most impact.

In view of the existing gaps in the uptake and use of social media for local political communication, the COVID-19 pandemic boosted online district communication strategies very unequally. The shape and strictness of the COVID-19 containment measures nuances the global assumption that social media use increased due to the pandemic (for Africa, see AUC/OECD 2021, p. 244). Shutdowns were not the same everywhere, also not within Ghana. The assumption that traditional public communication was largely affected might be incorrect. Conventional channels of political communication based on personal encounters or groups of people meeting in radio station studios were arguably more affected in metropolitan areas such as Kumasi. Higher population density, more professional encounters, and travelling increased the risk of COVID-19 and led to a stricter application of 'stay home' rules. Better testing and detection facilities in major cities might have additionally contributed to greater risk awareness, not to forget better access to alternative

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[17] Efforts to study these programmes face a methodological challenge because they are not archived.
[18] Known severally as gong-beater, gongman, and village announcer, this traditional means of communication remains vital in rural Africa, having taken roots during British colonial administration (see Ugboaja 1979, pp. 42–43).

ways of (digital) information and general purchases. On the contrary, rural districts that had yet to record any COVID-19 cases[19] were less concerned about the stay at home or social distancing protocols, coupled with the absence of access to shopping or information alternatives. In such places, district authorities faced difficulty in communicating anti-pandemic topics in general and social media was no promising way of enhancing the flow of information in this context. One councillor summarized in a recent telephone interview:

> "[W]e are yet to record a positive case … this makes it difficult to convince the people especially the youth that COVID-19 is real." (Councillor, Wa East on February 16, 2021)

In these rural locations, there was no need to create a new public space on social media platforms. Reasonably, elected officials still communicated nationally derived containment measures via established communication channels. Hence, shutdown scenarios seemed inconsequential to their communication strategy.

6 Conclusion: the reality that social media shapes

Public social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter present political discussions that are easily accessible for research on self-representation, civic engagement, eminent public debates and political communication. Recent research has repeatedly highlighted that developing countries are not excluded from the emergent use of social media in practice and research. However, there is a real risk to misconstrue social media observations as representative of the *full* reality of social and political phenomena. WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, amongst others, offer concurrent communication platforms. Whereas Twitter and blogs are always public WhatsApp, Facebook, and messenger services are often restricted to a closed group. Especially critical issues or positions would thus not necessarily be seen on public social media platforms, while restricted access to those other platforms makes it impossible for researchers to explore without the explicit consent of members. Studies of social media based on publicly available accounts generally present a highly interesting *digital social reality*. Still, we must understand this reality as situated within the limits of the digital space. This space has its attendant inequalities in access and use of technology as well as in individuals' desire to keep some communication private. Therefore, social media research on practices in official local political arenas requires a delicate balance between exploring the innovative use of digital techniques and the actors' real concerns and practices in these political spaces. This is a challenge that our familiarity and knowledge through extensive empirical fieldwork in the study districts help to confront.

In Ghana, local political communication and public political debate happen mainly through existing 'traditional' channels as the low absolute levels of digital communication show. It appears more reasonable to say that social media and digital technologies perform complementary functions in local government communication strategies and that the extent of their use depends not least in the sociogeographical context of the district. We observed much less social media use in the rural context as compared to the selected city context. Also, the increase in social media use

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[19] The missing recorded cases may also be a consequence of very limited testing capacity.

for political communication during the pandemic was largely moderated by the urban-rural divide. This observation raises doubts over the long-term effect of COVID-19 on local political communication in Ghana. To date, a large section of the population resides in the rural periphery, where they have restricted access to digital technology and electricity and lack digital literacy. That explains why these major political parties and elites still resort to traditional forms of communication to reach a larger audience (Boateng et al. 2020, p. 228; Dzisah 2020, p. 115).

Methodologically, we highlight the concurrent advantages and blind spots of social media research. Our data and analysis demonstrate that in analysing societal and political processes, it is essential for social media research to employ content analysis while incorporating actual research on the ground in the analogue sense. Rarely do extant studies consider this approach as a necessity. Key studies of digital communication in local governments (e.g., Bellström et al. 2016; Lappas et al. 2018) stick to the *online reality* of social media while neglecting the *analogue reality* of local political communication and debate. Despite the global social media, our data shows that interaction and civic engagement via comment and response remain limited in Ghana, one of Africa's hotspots for emergent digital communication. Moreover, topics discussed on social media do hardly mirror on-the-ground priorities. Rather, the digital space seems to evolve in the tension between self-presentation and anonymity, with the latter being at risk through indirect identification in the social realities of rural arenas.

One emergent question is whether these limitations are just a consequence of the restricted use of social media and whether these changes can be expected with wider use of social media. We are mindful that the social media platforms of the local governments are only incipient, and the increasing numbers of posts and comments raise the hope that local citizens embrace social media in due course. Insights from local governments in advanced democracies (e.g., Bellström et al. 2016, p. 549) show that the transition to digital communication requires time. Up to now, there is no evidence that, in the Global North, political debate on social media fully or even largely represents political opinions in society. Whether or not and to what extent local political communication in Ghana will further transition to digital media remains open. Local governments appear to adapt to the realities of local communication needs and to be less driven by the mere availability of modern technologies. The resilience of traditional communication platforms for provincial governments thereby helps avert one potential disadvantage to local governments' public engagement. We have pointed out that citizens' hesitations about engaging in online political debate with their municipal governments might be due to concerns that official social media platforms would betray commentators' background and political leanings. This scenario could even have deleterious consequences for the local political space, should political discussions increasingly move online. Thus, a mainly digital political communication strategy could exacerbate the currently fraught participation in municipal decision-making, given the persistent discrepancy in access to digital technology and internet resources.

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8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix I

Table A1. Code Table

Code category	Content and description of posts
Sanitation & Environment	Highlight districts' broader projects towards general cleanliness and environmental sustainability. These include drainage, sewage and their related infrastructure.
Roads, Safety & Justice	Posts that highlight the districts' approach to road safety, crime, training and general strategies to implementing rule of law.
Politics and elections	Posts that highlight the districts' position and comments on political issues both locally and central government's decisions (elections, voting, registration, appointments etc.). Again, districts' capacity building, public engagement; and the districts' cooperation with both international and local agencies, etc.
Health (COVID-19)	Posts that highlight the districts' health promotion. This includes laws and efforts to contain outbreaks and contact restrictions, material and moral support, oversight, in-donations and out-donations, etc. extra focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and containment measures
Education	Posts that show districts' support for education including enrolment, retention, quality, assessments and material support e.g. infrastructures, oversight, etc.
Markets & Revenue	Districts generate much of own funds from local market settings. Interesting here are posts that highlight districts' market infrastructure, revenue generation and efforts to control these places. It also includes decisions on advertisement and other revenue sources.
Dialogue	Posts that invite citizens to react to information or announcements, to participate in municipal activities, or to participate in offline activities, etc.
Self-promotion	Posts seeking to present mayors and elected councillors in a positive image. E.g., the frequency with which their names and images appear in posts of district events, etc.
Sports	Posts that present districts' youth, sports and physical wellbeing. These include physical infrastructure and information on sporting activities relevant for districts.
Faith-based & Entertainment events	Posts purporting to endorse districts' religious diversity and tolerance, including mayors and councillors' participation in faith-based festive events; entertainment and other secular celebrations

Note
The categories are not mutually exclusive. Some of the items overlap. For example, mayors sponsor weekly sanitation initiatives to clear filth but these are also part of measures against the spread of COVID-19.

8.2 Appendix II

Table A2. Ghana: District status and the existent social media account (*N*=260)

District status	Existent social media platform						
	Yes	%	No	%	Total	%
District	98	68.1	46	31.9	144	100
Municipal	94	85.5	16	14.5	110	100
Metropolitan	6	100	-	-	6	100
Total	198		62		260	

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Table A3. Ghana: activity status of district social media platforms (*n*=198)

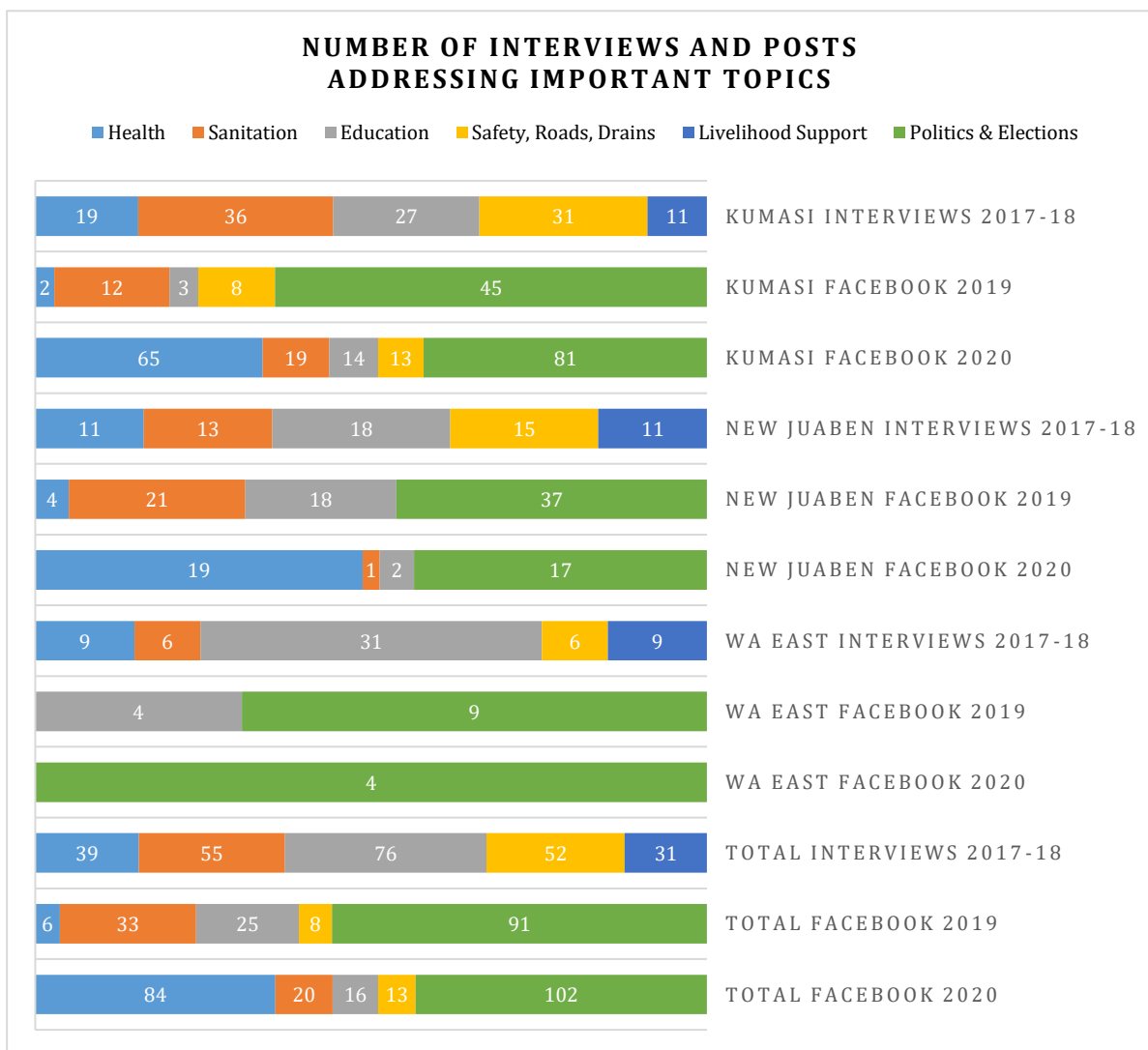| District status | Vibrancy of existent social media platform | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Active | % | Partially active | % | Inactive | % | Total |
| District | 33 | 37.5 | 27 | 49.1 | 38 | 69.1 | 94 |
| Municipal | 51 | 58.0 | 27 | 49.1 | 16 | 29.1 | 94 |
| Metropolitan | 4 | 4.5 | 1 | 1.8 | 1 | 1.8 | 6 |
| Total | 88 | 100 | 55 | 100 | 55 | 100 | 198 |

Source: Authors' tabulation.

A general note on the overall Ghana data

A number of 'sprinter districts' carved out of existing districts in 2018 have created social media accounts. There are a few outliers. Especially rural districts that were early adopters of social media communication platforms: Ho West (2011); Kwahu Afram Plains (2013); Nkwanta South (2013); Sunyani Municipal (2013); Sekyere Afram Plains (2014); Afigya Kwabre (2014); Sene East (2014). However, these were active just for a few years. Still, a handful of early adopter districts actively maintain their social media platforms. These include Adentan Municipal (2012); Ningo Prampram (2014); and Bia West (2014).

8.3 Appendix III

Fig A1. Alternative view of information depicted in Table 3

NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS AND POSTS ADDRESSING IMPORTANT TOPICS

■ Health ■ Sanitation ■ Education ■ Safety, Roads, Drains ■ Livelihood Support ■ Politics & Elections

	Health	Sanitation	Education	Safety, Roads, Drains	Livelihood Support	Politics & Elections
KUMASI INTERVIEWS 2017-18	19	36	27	31	11	
KUMASI FACEBOOK 2019	2	12	3	8		45
KUMASI FACEBOOK 2020	65	19	14	13		81
NEW JUABEN INTERVIEWS 2017-18	11	13	18	15	11	
NEW JUABEN FACEBOOK 2019	4	21	18			37
NEW JUABEN FACEBOOK 2020	19	1	2			17
WA EAST INTERVIEWS 2017-18	9	6	31	6	9	
WA EAST FACEBOOK 2019			4			9
WA EAST FACEBOOK 2020						4
TOTAL INTERVIEWS 2017-18	39	55	76	52	31	
TOTAL FACEBOOK 2019	6	33	25	8		91
TOTAL FACEBOOK 2020	84	20	16	13		102

9 Latest Publications in the University of Bayreuth African Studies Working Papers

Title	Author(s)	Year of Publication	Issue
'Social media is for the elite': Local political communication in Ghana in times of COVID-19	Matthew Sabbi, Dieter Neubert and Alexander Stroh	2022	32
Who runs the municipality?: The intractable interest of neo-traditional actors in Ghana's local state	Matthew Sabbi	2018	22
Politischer Opfertod im Arabischen Frühling : Protestsuizid und gewaltloses Märtyrertum als Protest am Beispiel Tunesiens und Ägyptens	Antje Daniel	2018	21
Civil societies in Africa? Forms of social self-organization between the poles of globalization and local socio-political order	Dieter Neubert	2014	12
Sur Les Pas de J. Petterson: A. Lemba, Romancier Congolais	Crispin Maalu-Bungi	2012	8
Kuduru - Musikmachen ohne Führerschein	Nadine Siegert	2009	7
Theory and Practice of Reconciliation in Rwanda	Marcu Grohmann	2009	6
Trade unions and the informal economy in Zambia: Building strength or loosing ground?	Georg Heidenreich	2007	5

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