WhatsApp in African trade networks: Professional practice and obtaining attention in AfCFTA policy formation
by Scott Timcke

Abstract
The emerging attention to the role of WhatsApp in African politics tends to examine it as a conduit for misinformation, or as part of a suite of digital tools that destabilize existing hierarchies. Within these larger transformations, African policy-makers are finding ways of incorporating WhatsApp into their professional practice. This study aims to understand more about the dynamics of elite influence and consensus building via participant observation of African WhatsApp groups that are dedicated to shaping the framing, construction and meaning of intra-continental trade policy in advance of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) coming into effect. I report how these groups view WhatsApp as a ‘technology of Pan-Africanism’ but also how this platform facilitates ‘backstage activism’ and self-promotion within elite cultures. The study also notes elite recruitment, and motivation, as well as these elites’ self-conception of science, technology and innovation.

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Introduction
As the rates of smartphones and Internet penetration dramatically increased on the African continent throughout the 2010s — from seven percent in 2010 to 25 percent in 2017 (World Bank, 2021) — there is anticipation about what the ‘digital dividends’ (World Bank, 2016) might mean for the prospect of development. Platforms are part of this transformation. Of a total population of 1.3 billion people, currently Africa has 191 million active social media users (Kemp, 2018), with WhatsApp being the preferred
platform in almost every sub-Saharan African country (Kazeem, 2020b) [1]. Within these larger transformations, African policy-makers are finding ways of incorporating WhatsApp into their professional practice. Already, the World Bank reports that in 2016, 15 percent of African opinion leaders used social media to receive information on development (Robinson, 2017). But of equal importance is how elites use apps and platforms to build and maintain influence in a networked world.

The emerging attention to the role of WhatsApp in African politics tends to examine it as a conduit for misinformation (Economist, 2019), part of a suite of digital tools that destabilize existing hierarchies (Nyabola, 2018; Cheeseman, et al., 2020) with associated government reprisals and intentional disruption of Internet communication (‘shutdowns’) around key political moments (CIPESA, 2019), as well as changing labor conditions (Mothobi, 2021). Much of this research “mainly stressing its damaging effects during elections” (Treré, 2020) is nested within a broader study of how Africa continues to be site of experimentation with ‘ICT for development’ programs, many of which are rife with contradictions as they seek to close the ‘digital divide’ (Gagliardone, 2016). In line with calls to be more attentive to the constitutive role of WhatsApp in communication in the Global South (see Cruz and Harindranath, 2020), this paper examines African elites’ use of this platform.

Two research questions drive this paper. The first concerns whether the extension of existing digital networks, or the establishment of new nodes, alters the existing distribution of power and clout in policy formation. The second is ascertaining elites’ self-comprehension of the effectiveness of these channels for form policy to advance the intra-continental and intra-regional trade. While similar kinds of ‘adaptations to affordances’ were documented and theorized about when the Global North ‘came online’ (e.g., Castells, 1998), the acceleration of Africans ‘coming online’ via smartphones means that conditions are different enough to warrant a new round of digital anthropology. These kinds of research questions follow Baulch and her colleagues’ research directive which asks, “what are the social and political implications of the turn to messaging (or chat) for online communications?” (Bualch, et al., 2020).

To understand more about the dynamics of elite influence via platforms and the social context of power in which it occurs, I conducted interviews with administrators of African WhatsApp groups. These groups were dedicated to disseminating information and promoting events on intra-African trade policy. These administrators could be called ‘influence elites’ (Wedel, 2017), or a ‘WhatsApper’ (Milan and Barbosa, 2020). Although — and this is the term I prefer and adopt in this paper — a more suitable description might be ‘policy influencers’ insofar that they serve as information vendors, brokers and connectors to coordinate influence from multiple moving perches, inside and outside official structures. The phrase ‘policy influencer’ signals the entrepreneurial, transactional and monetized components of being an information vendor. Indeed, as Frank Pasquale’s adage reminds researchers, “the less we think about how we are being influenced, the more powerful influencers can become” [2].

Taking up invitations from these administrators, I joined and was introduced to two of these groups. Between June 2020 and December 2020, I observed general features of how these African digital elites shaped the framing, construction and meaning of policy in the final stages of negotiations around the start of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This paper presents data about the organization of modus operandi of elites as they create and wield influence to investigate how African elites operate [3]. It also provides some information on the configuration in which elites self-organize. This study occurred within a broader context in which physical organized meetings, workshops and policy conferences were less common due to coronavirus lockdowns.

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**Influence in a networked world**

Typically, elite studies produced in late industrialism generated a ‘command post’ conceptualization of elite power. To simplify, these ‘command posts’ were the places from which elites were able to wield power
over others in a hierarchy. There is a distinct and delineated hierarchy which aspired to rationalization in the workplace and authority over it. Robert Putnam’s (1976) *Comparative study of political elites* can be considered the emblematic capstone in this line of analysis that identified several main topics in the research agenda of elites. These were elite formation, transformation and interaction with social structures. Secondary considerations included elite recruitment, motivation, as well as their relationship to the masses. Within these parameters U.S. sociologists undertook their empirical studies of elite socialization (*e.g.* Edinger and Searing, 1967; Searing, 1969). Indeed, Putnam’s subsequent research found that increasingly “technical credentials” mattered a great deal “for elite recruitment” as presumably “greater technical efficiency” could lead to “greater innovativeness with respect to the tools of policy, though probably not with respect to policy objectives” [4].

When looking at this state of sociological practice Lukes concluded that too many conceptions of (elite use of) power — like Putnam’s — were basic, being some variation on “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests” [5]. Thus, the issues were not a matter of limited data, but that the data was collected without sufficient theorization which in turn led to poor methodologies. Dahl (1957) was a named target for Lukes. By putting considerable emphasis on “power comparability,” Dahl meant “to compare the power of two individuals” one must look at the properties of power (like its base and deployment) and its reception when used (in its scope, opponents’ moves, and the probability of success of the endeavor). “Differences in bases and means of actors” Dahl wrote “are very likely to produce differences in the responses of those they seek to control” [6]. Critics of pluralism, like Bachrach and Baratz pointed out that Dahl overlooked the role of “indirect influence” that is “instrumental in preventing ... issues from being raised” [7]. Effectively through shaping the agenda, those with power do not have to actively participate at every point to have a final decision that suits their interests.

Yet, and this is the point of emphasis, Lukes argued that by putting so much emphasis on principals, their interests and agents, pluralists and their critics missed the social context of power. Drawing upon theorists like Scott and Foucault among others, Lukes argued that there needed to be a more sophisticated conception of power that can account for its non-coercive sources in modern society that frequently guide people to act contrary to their interests. This is the preliminary argument for the necessity of ideology, a line of critique that pluralists and their critics prematurely dismissed without adequate justification.

By the mid-1990s, Castells (1998) had begun to provide a grammar for the social context of power in light of digitization. Responding to the affordances provided by digital networking, Castells sought to conceptualize a new morphology to describe the ‘restructuring process’ underway in the material base and social life produced by late capitalism. This reconfiguration of the relationships between technology, economy and society metaphorically resembled a network. Assembled from Marxian theory, urban sociology and social movement research, Castells suggested that networks concurrently have productive relations and consumption processes which allow for broader exchange, interaction and communication processes across space. These features allow networks to be self-configurable, complex structures of communication and power, which cooperate and compete internally and externally according to interests expressed within nodes. They have the capability of self-renewal in the sense that they may introduce new actors and content as conditions change. Their dynamic nature makes them flexible, scalable and survivable, which are suitable for a continuously changing techno-economic environment.

Taking stock of these organizational changes, researchers of elites began to register how elites were able to use their wealth, social and cultural capital to better adapt to the features of globalization, insulating themselves from the negative social consequences of this process. “Elites are cosmopolitan, people are local,” Castells wrote [8]. While there have been empirical studies of the ‘transnational capitalist class’ that benefited from globalization (Robinson and Harris, 2000), it would be a misnomer to believe that elites have uniform interests. In the United States, for example, there are such intense intra-elite factional contests over foundational political, social, economic and ecological questions that the society has entered a stage of protracted fragile stability (Timcke, 2021). More broadly, across Western democracies, Piketty and his colleagues characterize a trenchant politics between a Brahmin Left versus a Merchant Right (Piketty, 2020; Gethin, *et al*., 2021) over the relationship between markets and government, a contest occurring
concurrently to the ‘anti-system’ formations brewing in popular politics (see Hopkin, 2020). Much more than Putnam and the pluralists, these more recent studies are better able to account for the constitutive role of ideology and infrastructure that allows elites to be influential in a networked world.

Adding graduality

These macro-sociological conceptions of power and organization can be supplemented by micro-sociological literatures on influencer and celebrity studies produced by media sociologists (e.g., Abidin, 2015), indeed they need to be in order to better understand the clout within areas of network society deemed ‘peripheral’. Where once mass media systems in industrial societies made it difficult for many people to attain attention, presently there are means within network societies to gain and commodify notoriety in a much more granular and participatory form. The result is micro-celebrity, which is especially perceptible in the influencer industry.

Abidin (2015) definers influencers as “everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media.” Typically, these influencers present a “textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blog or social media posts.” Given the testimony and witnessing that form the basis of these ‘advertorials’ and endorsements, the various tropes, frames and genres are key to understanding the ‘industrial practices’ in this kind of ‘attention economy’. Accordingly, media sociologists studying micro-celebrity offer a detailed analysis of the practice of power enabled by the “growth of digital technology” within a climate of “neoliberal individualism” to create “a marketing media nexus distinct to the opening decades of the twenty-first century.” Herein “fame and following” provide some of the means to convert “social capital to economic capital”.

Much like there is an influencer industry with advertising agencies working with influencers to promote popular and aspirational consumer products to global audiences, so too is there an emerging policy sector in the African context. As Marwick explains, micro-celebrity is neither an identity nor a ‘scaled down’ form of celebrity, but rather a practice, “a way to present oneself online and relate to others.” This practice combines “a self-presentation strategy, a subject position [and] a labor.” Still there are some differences that come from self-positioning, the bearing of status and the platform of choice. For example, the “important currency of attention is tied up in social media algorithms” which “allows examination of the impact of emergent means of attention acquisition” in turn shaping the life-chances of individual creators.

Tufekci’s (2013) research on attention in global information flows was generated from a study of social movements’ digital practices. Some of her observations also apply to elite networking. For example, she notes how attention is a “key resource”; Attention allows the introduction of “preferred framing” while “attempting to neutralize opposition framing”. “Gaining attention may not guarantee desired outcomes,” Tufekci notes “and attention itself may introduce other threats to movement goals; however, lack of attention is likely to smother a movement.” Typically, the “important currency of attention is tied up in social media algorithms” which contribute to shaping the life-chances of individual creators, however in the case study in this paper the lack of metrics helps preserve status, as I will explain later.

By noting how “platform algorithms are shaping content in ways big and small” Marwich is correct that they are “a key factor in how attention is distributed.” In short, the practice of micro-celebrity is informed by the construction of the platform itself. However, while it is part of the structure of global information flows and a “relatively latecomer to social media” (Pang and Woo, 2020), given its relative simplicity to platforms like Instagram or YouTube, WhatsApp influencers are less shaped by ‘status affordances’. What I mean is that while Instagram and YouTube have prominent follower and view counts, WhatsApp does not have these features. On that note, while other platforms have metrics that allow
researchers to use data scraping techniques to trace ‘the social life of data’ [18], it is difficult to know the reach of information or to quantify the audience on WhatsApp. Nevertheless, what in some circumstances may be deemed a drawback, in this case may be a relative strength; in the coming sections I will describe how African policy influencers leverage the lack of metrics as ‘status affordances’ to maintain their status as credible authorities.

The lack of metric-centralism design might also present an opportunity to revisit prevailing assumptions about big data and the quantification of attention shaping publics on platforms. As Cruz and Harindranath (2020) note, “when dealing with the use of technologies in the Global South, we need to go beyond exoticization and fully engage with what those regions and populations can teach us about digital technologies in contexts of diversity, inequality and forms of economic, physical, and social insecurity.” My understanding of this point is that while it is useful to draw upon literature and concepts developed from studies of influence in and on ‘big data platforms’ more broadly, those same concepts might not have the same applicability for WhatsApp. Nevertheless, it is still useful to refigure these concepts to help guide questions and programs of study.

Continuing the point about metrics, while cottage industry advertisers use WhatsApp, the lack of quantification means that the platform is less suited to the needs of advertisers who rely upon ‘hard numbers’ to inform business decisions. While not absent from commodification impulses, the relative absence of automated commodification of data supports Pang and Woo’s (2020) conclusion that the platform has features that are especially useful for “political and civic engagement.” “Scalability and replicability” they write, “have made it relatively easy to disseminate content without links to its original context or sender.” Another valuable feature is that WhatsApp has discrete group chats which are less prone to ‘context collapse’ than other platforms that are built around a stream of content produced for different audiences. Pang and Woo argue that WhatsApp well fits those who wish for “open and meaningful conversations on key issues.” The result is participants are “building a sense of cohesion within their groups” (Pang and Woo, 2020). Reciprocity, solidaristic connections and coordination make WhatsApp suitable for political and civic communication, in addition to limiting surveillance when certain settings are enabled. Altogether, Pang and Woo provide a three-fold topology where users can 1) maintain ‘visibility’ by creating or disseminating content and engage in ongoing conversation; 2) engage in ‘passive facilitation’ which involves supportive activities, like forwarding or curating information; and 3) undertake ‘relational labor’ that informs users about issues then builds connections between individuals and wider movements.

Lastly, influence in a networked world is also shaped by enduring and prevailing social inequalities, some centuries in the making. As a heuristic, ‘digital divides’ is a useful term for the consequences of uneven and combined development which can be seen in ‘deep mediatization’ (Hepp, 2019), insofar that the concept can usefully draw together topics and events that might initially be otherwise thought of as being disparate, dissimilar or disconnected. Accordingly, the concept can prime scholars to think about how issues involving racial, gendered, capability and class disparities among others relate to the history of technologies, the nature of capitalist development as well as property relations. The approach can focus attention to at least four levels of analysis of social life, these being:

1. Comparative analyses of the sites where inequalities intersect and compound one another, thus shaping the subjective comprehension of everyday life.
2. How discourse around these divides can be analyzed to reveal ‘bias,’ ‘the coloniality of knowledge’ and ‘ideology’ to use liberal, post-colonial and Marxian terms, thus revealing how relative social processes are entwined with knowledge of them.
3. To encourage an analysis that pushes beyond direct observation by conceptualizing many kinds of inequalities as realizations of more fundamental processes. These are processes that are less easily observed, thus needing indirect observation methodologies and theorization to enunciate.
4. Finally, to prompt a widening of the scope of analysis by situating observations of inequalities in historical terms, so that they might better understand the broader transformations of society, politics, economy and culture during modernity.
As these features apply to this study, Africa has been subject to intense ‘underdevelopment’. As Rodney (1972) explains, European imperialist looting undermined, if not reversed, African social development. “The wealth that was created by African labor and from African resources was grabbed by the capitalist countries of Europe,” Rodney writes, “and in the second place, restrictions were placed upon African capacity to make the maximum use of its economic potential” [19]. The ongoing consequences of drainage arising from colonial extractive logics differently positions Africans to act within the digital sphere; put differently the ramifications of ‘underdevelopment’ is the primary cause of a present ‘digital divide’. It is this underdevelopment that AfCFTA seeks to remedy.

**Background to AfCFTA**

To make sense of platforms for policy influencers in Africa we need to briefly describe the vision of AfCFTA. Channeling Pan-African political philosophy, an African free trade association has been an ambition among post-Independence technocrats. Although there were prior expressions, the main organizational endorsements were the Organisation of African Unity’s Lagos Plan of Action in 1980 and the Abuja Declaration in 1991, momentum built under the African Union’s (2013) Agenda 2063. After negotiations to harmonize regulations, customs procedures, tariffs and settlements, in 2018 the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement was signed. When fully implemented, the single market would include 1.3 billion people. Through boosting “intrag regional trade in manufacturing” by approximately 80 percent, the World Bank estimates that “by 2035” AfCTRA “would contribute to lifting an additional 30 million people from extreme poverty and 68 million people from moderate poverty” [20]. They add that “real income gains from full implementation of the agreement could increase by 7 percent, or nearly US$450 billion” [21]. Carlos Lopes, the head of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa during the negotiations to form the single market, has said that AfCTRA “is the most important regional integration project ever ... At its core it’s a project to take Africa out of commodities dependency. And commodities dependency is the colonial model. So, if we succeed in having a different economic structure, that’s when we really get into the crux of the matter” (Lopes quoted by Allison, 2021).

As Wamkele Mene (2021), the Secretary-General of the AfCFTA Secretariat — an autonomous organization that manages the affairs of the customs union, stated, the purpose of the treaty is to “make trade easier for the African businessman and woman.” This involves simplifying credentials and verification, standardization for rules of origin, customs declarations, platforms for payments and settlements and market intelligence portals. Lowering the cost of trade and “improving hard and soft infrastructure at the borders” also come with these changes [22]. Mene (2021) puts considerable emphasis on the role of communication technology in resolving the legacy of trade issues. “Inter-market connectivity, data access and soft infrastructure are critical to the success of trade agreements,” he noted.

In addition to the sticking power of exorbitant tariffs, prior attempts to improve intra-African trade were bedeviled by a lack of capital, limited infrastructure and a lack of market intelligence. However, Mene suggests that even ‘off the shelf’ consumer software can lower trade compliance costs. This would make it easier for African businesses to integrate into global supply chains, with the subsequent spillover effects projected to create considerably more opportunities for African manufacturers and labor. He wrote:

There are two things far more prevalent today than at the time of earlier trade agreements on the continent: ubiquitous digital technology and social networks for knowledge creation and sharing. If we immediately, rapidly and aggressively harness those trends to address soft infrastructure issues while we ramp up capacity to tackle the harder infrastructure and material resources bottlenecks, we stand a very strong chance of making a bigger dent in the Africa transformation agenda than previous
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These remarks are indicative of one branch of elite thought on how the ‘soft-infrastructure’ borne from science, technology and innovation can create capacity for customs officials, thereby producing ‘alignment’ and regional trade integration. To this end, the AfCFTA Secretariat is building a series of Web sites that can host debates (www.afcfta.blog) and provide tools for entrepreneurs. These are imagined as promoting rapid, cost-effective dissemination of information and market intelligence so that small batch manufactures can also participate in the spoils of AfCFTA. Much of this perspective draws upon the thought of the late Calestous Juma, a Harvard-based leading African social theorist whose work focused on science, technology and innovation. Juma (2016) had a vision for technological inclusion through harnessing emerging technologies. It is within this context that policy influencers on WhatsApp operate.

Methodology and data collection

Unlike other messaging platforms which have public groups, Pang and Woo (2020) note that WhatsApp groups grow by private invitation from administrators. Although by no means insurmountable, this technical design presents a different set of field conditions for researchers. As Pang and Woo (2020) elaborate, “technical features may evoke and inform the research design as well as particular types of methods ... Because of the relatively closed nature of WhatsApp groups, one challenge in terms of doing research on WhatsApp is methodological.” In line with Hepp’s point about adopting “a broader view of digital infrastructures” the methodological goal is to “look at deep mediatization from the actors’ point of view” to explicate how “human practices” are “entangled with digital media and their related infrastructures” [23]. In this case study, it is how policy influencers use the app intensely to advance the agenda of trade and regionalism.

For this reason, a qualitative approach was adopted. Data was collected in two ways, namely semi-structured interviews with 10 key informants who were administrators of WhatsApp groups and participant observation in two WhatsApp groups, each for a period of six months. For interviews, sampling was referral and purposive, with participants selected because of their experience of organizing discussions on platforms and the point of view they could offer. Interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 120 minutes. Three informants were interviewed a second time. The interviewees came from or were based in west Africa, east Africa, and southern Africa, while one hailed from the Caribbean. In line with Putnam’s observation about the technical background of elites, the interviewees were all highly educated persons — all had Master’s degrees, two had doctorates and three had published books with scholarly presses. The interviewees were very accomplished in their field. One was an executive diplomat heading up a supra-national organization; two were directors of large programs in different supra-national organizations. The remainder were leading academics and notable figures in civil society who had served on government commissions. Of these, six were men and four were women. Notwithstanding these attributes, it would be a mistake to put too much stock on personal characteristics (imagined or apparent), social standing or the personalities of ‘policy influencers’ to predict agendas and interests. Therefore, there is little value in comparing influencers’ personalities; rather what is important is what their social positions allows them to influence in their networks. Pseudonyms have been used for interviewees and anonymizing techniques have been applied to obscure identities.

Data and discussion

Spanning June to December 2020, the observational period focused on how the ‘discursive opportunity
structure’ (see Milan and Barbosa, 2020) was constructed in these groups. Focusing on incorporating small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) into regional trade, and comprising a maximum of 256 members, Group 1 had an established routine that had crystallized over the course of its three years of operation. From Monday to Saturday at around 9am, Xola Nkabinde, the administrator, would circulate five to six links. These links would be to newspaper stories, policy documents, academic research or reports issued by institutions, banks, auditing firms, unions, NGOs, and rating agencies. Material for these ‘morning briefings’ was also sourced from the UN, IMF, World Bank, ILO and well as the leading private research firms in the country in which Nkabinde was based. Below each link was a long excerpt as well as a shorter commentary noting its importance or calling back to material that had been circulated earlier on the chat group. The excerpts were means to bypass paywalls. On occasion there were details about upcoming online talks and launches of books from scholarly presses.

Later in the day, as current events unfolded, typically Xola Nkabinde would circulate documents that went beyond broadcast journalism. For example, if a trial had concluded, a PDF of the judgement would be uploaded to the chat group. Or if a government minister had given a notable speech, the text would be circulated. During the coronavirus pandemic, some of the distributed material included PDFs of presentations made by state officials doing media briefings, or regulations that had been promulgated by the government. Like with the morning briefing, some preliminary analysis was included, pointers and connections to other materials. During the morning, group members replied to these messages, adding to conversations, contributing analysis, making further connections or uploading official documents that they had in their possession. This active participation was not intense; most days about 10 people would participate, although rarely the same individuals.

In the afternoon and weekends, the tone of the contributions shifted; participation became less formal, less structured. For example, half the time members circulated links without context or explanation. Additionally, during this time members posted vacancies at their organizations or they posted advertisements for various initiatives that their departments or firms were undertaking. Other self-promotional activities were also acceptable, like members posting new positions, journalistic coverage of their projects or successes. Whereas the mornings were mostly devoted to politics, policy, governance and the regulatory context of SMMEs, afternoons and weekends shifted towards more practical considerations. For example, there were notifications of rental space within government sponsored innovation hubs or upcoming government sponsored webinars on the fundamentals of business development.

While having similar practices as Group 1, Group 2 was narrower in its scope. This group confined itself to the economic empowerment of a marginalized group in the working of the AfCFTA. Notwithstanding commitments to inclusionary economic systems, Group 2 conjoined advocacy with economic ventures. For instance, the administrator would post that he was delivering paid webinars on empowerment, or links to YouTube livestream where he would speak about products and services. While raising the question of payments, I was unable to ascertain if monies were exchanging hands. This tone filtered into the group more broadly and members frequently promoted services and endorsed products made by the marginalized group. This kind of self-promotion included selling tickets for upcoming speaking engagements and panel events, often when members themselves were involved either as organizers or as presenters. This group was formed in the first quarter of 2020 and so it established its routine during an economic contraction caused by the coronavirus, and where many incomes were diminished. The impression was that one of the main purposes of this group was to create personal income streams through paid activism.

Compared to Group 1, Group 2 was noticeably more entrepreneurial and prone to what Treré (2020) calls ‘backstage activism’. Drawing upon Goffman’s work on dramaturgical presentations of the self, Treré means that the tone and conduct tends towards the more “banal, mundane, submerged, informal, emotionally driven” performances. As opposed to “open, visible, public” communication, ‘backstage activism’ involves discussions of tactics, testing rhetoric and so on. So when it came to disseminating research on conditions faced by this marginalized group and what that means for their chances, group discussions involved how to operationalize information. On one occasion, a member converted findings into a graphical image suitable for sharing on social media. In dramaturgical term, Group 1 was much more
reserved, conducted themselves as if they were on the ‘frontstage’ where the codes of members’ social standings had to be preserved; analysis had to be crisp and to the point, members had to demonstrate a certain ‘savviness’. By contrast, Group 2 was more open to ‘exploratory explanations.’ The drawback was that at times it became a venue where beliefs about 5G networks causing coronavirus percolated.

Turning to administrators of other groups, leveraging his nearly two decades of experience in trade in Ghana, and a decade of trade and regional integration advocacy through a local NGO, Odom Kwame has found that WhatsApp has greatly enhanced his public outreach efforts. Attentive to the wider digital turn in Africa, like Meme and others at the AfCFTA Secretariat, Kwame is enthusiastic about how even basic connectivity can greatly improve life chances and primary business operations. He explained this through agricultural metaphors, like how knowing weather forecasts can help a farmer better plan their workday.

Given the current baseline around knowledge management even these small kinds of improvements can have dramatic spillover effects, he believes. Similarly, John Samuels, an ambassador, noted that WhatsApp is a very promising tool for the dissemination of policy briefs and project documents. “It was widely used between staff and even with Ambassadors, Ministers, officials of [Organization] Member-states,” he said, adding that “all of this would have been a personal basis or chat groups. These were quick exchanges for points in a discussion”. Samuels saw potential for WhatsApp to be a low-cost solution for policy curation by development agencies and regional institutions. “It is an area that should be pursued for Southern policy practitioners to be more effective, rapidly informed even alerted to experiences in related areas that may be relevant to improve evidence-based decision-making and policy implementation.”

In his communication strategy Kwame prioritized “trust and purpose”. This was demonstrated through sharing reliable “open source” information that “provided context” to mediate between “policy-makers, policy takers, and laymen”. He did not have a pre-set dissemination schedule; rather his protocol focused on “delivering the right information at the right time.” This information was intended to “serve to make more informed decisions”. This approach seemed to avoid the pitfalls where “more frequent updates” ended up following the ‘topic of day’ within current events as this could lead to an information glut where “members become swamped”. This was similar to what Abidin (2015) called the ‘perceived interconnectedness’ of influencers whose interactions gave an impression of intimacy. In addition to an agenda for each group, Kwame tried to disseminate content that was “as personalized as possible” to “niche groups”. Timing dissemination was important to “setting the pace” on the groups. He also privately asked designated “pacemakers” in the group to help “management of the day-to-day” affairs. To keep the group useful, he periodically collected feedback or took informal surveys to assess usefulness, a form of “monitoring and evaluation.” As for day-to-day practice, his mantra was “receive, push, seek, look, gather to enrich the discussion”. Odom Kwame saw value in homogenization within segmented, topical groups. This was not a drawback as groups were inter-related as members belonged to several and so could forward messages if they saw potential resonance, he believed. Overall, he referred to WhatsApp networking and group administration as a combination of “profession and passion”.

Adusa Kumah, a director in a regional trade organization, is the administrator of a very exclusive WhatsApp group. The approximately 150 members of this group were drawn from across the continent, including ministers, senior civil servants, judges, financiers, academics and journalists. Kumah described members as being of “fairly senior standing” who were “key drivers for policy.” Professional backgrounds varied, from law and social scientists to engineers and scientists. This multi-national and professional diversity gave the group “both depth and several vantage points for commentary and critique.” With an eye towards “efficient conversation,” this group aimed to create an “echo system” to “keep ideas in circulation,” Adusa Kumah noted. Considerable value was placed on evidence-based open policy discussion on various technical documents that were shared on a day-to-day basis. Through “wide deliberation and rapid analysis” the goal of the group was to clarify positions and stakes, as well as help generate a variety of methods of resolution. Effectively, Kumah’s group used WhatsApp to formalize and preserve intra-African social ties to build social, cultural and political capital. The intangible, but nevertheless equally important, elements included sharing of knowledge, data and analysis for African integration as AfCFTA was set to come into effect as and when the global coronavirus pandemic abated (see Trade Law Centre NPC [TRALAC], n.d.). In this spirit, Kumah’s group had begun to experiment with making technical primers designed for the
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Groups whose members had less clout are experimenting with other models. Kenneth Angula is a young economic research analyst specializing on regional integration in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Following trends he observed in South African digital space, Angula established a WhatsApp Group in late 2018. Similar in size to Kumah’s group, Angula’s group primarily exchanged SADC, SACU and AfCFTA related trade bulletins. But this group’s notable success had been to improve economic and trade literacy among the national press. “We also act like a distribution network for members research, to get exposure for work that might otherwise be overlooked.” For this group of marginalized researchers and analysis, they were experimenting with building their own networks. There was another consideration in the making of this network. Angula explained that the reason he became interested in regional trade was because, in his opinion, the politics in his country was regressive and stagnate; narrow party-based political reasoning meant that there was little discursive space to present technical and empirical economic reasoning, let alone have them sway government decisions. His dissatisfaction with politics led him to believe that trade treaties were a means to circumvent politicians and otherwise improve the quality of life for his fellow citizens.

This path to improving everyday life is not without skeptics. Due to the “disenchantment and inequality” it has wrought, Kwame believed Africans tend to be suspicious of globalization and trade: on the ground, the “common man is more [invested in] nationalism” while politicians can have “wrong assumptions” about regional integration. For Kwame trade and integration “allows you to look beyond the boundaries”. It also takes many forms. As this relates to WhatsApp, given that Africa has “little common identity”, transnational digital communication groups can help promote a “common identity and purpose”. While the “world has gone nationalistic, Africa can show solidarity” through “common resource management”. This sentiment was echoed by Angula who said that as a collaborative space, WhatsApp “gives us a vision” of what regional collaboration could be like.

Much like there were questions about whose ideas were embedded in governance structures, so too were questions about whose vision had the most influence on WhatsApp. For example, Kwame notes that there were “pockets of hyper-connected” and “super groups” that operated in this digital space, possibly speaking of groups like the one that Kumah administered. While underscoring that most of these ‘hyper-connected’ had good intentions, “not everyone is benevolent”: “Many people are in it for themselves”, he said, a comment that could apply to the dynamics in Group 2. Therefore, Kwame put considerable emphasis on a person’s profile and track record, as these formed a source of trust. But profiling of this sort limited access to people like Angula who were still building their profile and whose country did not have clout on the continent. Similarly, trust has drawbacks as it allows inadvertent misinformation or fake news to spread as group members ‘trust the source’. To Kwame, Facebook failed as a useful communication tool due to the lack of “lack of moderation, lack of verification,” as well as too many “conflicts of interest” because monetization is tied to “clicks, regardless of reliable information”. Among other reasons, for Kwame, the absence of these metrics and affordances helped to “remove the clutter” as there was no incentive to chase clicks-based revenue.

Based in southern Africa, trade analyst Xola Nkabinde administered several WhatsApp groups that focus on African regional trade corridors, Group 1 included. He believed there was a “thirst for information from cross border perspectives.” He explained that “WhatsApp on the continent acts like Twitter for Americans.” Asked to elaborate Nkabinde said that much like Twitter, WhatsApp helped “form and reform” elite discourse on the continent thereby shaping agendas off-line. He described WhatsApp as a “technology for Pan-Africanism”, and suggested that the platform was powering the imagination of African policy-makers, a remark that could well describe Angula’s sentiments. At the same time, Nkabinde noted that WhatsApp had given rise to “entrepreneurs in the policy space”. Like influencers on other platforms, these actors were
looking to leverage and be leveraged, a transactional relationship that was particularly helpful to those like Angula who found themselves marginalized.

Kumah believed there were few drawbacks to using WhatsApp to shape policy futures. From his perspective, these groups were “borderless and timeless.” Still, he admitted that WhatsApp groups were downstream from other forces like a government disconnecting a country from the Internet precisely when these groups were needed the most (Kazeem, 2020a). To date, he had not noticed any misinformation or intentional misdirection. When errors occurred, the group’s broad interdisciplinary net caught them and were “quickly corrected,” Kumah said. But there were other risks surrounding this kind of elite discourse on WhatsApp. Given the platform’s ‘forward message’ feature, there were risks of ‘leakage.’ Irrespective of how trusting and discrete a group was, these elite users tended to act like they were in the public eye. So even while there were elements of ‘backstage activism’, group members cared to maintain their standing and reputation. For example, it was rare to see any member of Group 1 make declarative statements; language was often couched and hedged, at least with respect to the responses to the ‘morning briefing’. Depending on perspective, another drawback involved the upper limit of WhatsApp groups. At a max of 256 members, the platform could reproduce cliques and a reinforce a ‘link culture.’ Given an immediate audience of peers and professional associates, the ‘perceived interconnectedness’ that Abidin noted takes on a different form for these African policy influencers. Interactions on WhatsApp groups blended intimacy and professional poise and involved a dramatology that leveraged considerable expertise and experience in an effort to sway peers inside and outside the group to adopt pro-integration policies.

### Obtaining attention and sustaining influence

Spanning transnational, regional and continental spaces, policy influencers are extra-bureaucratic persons who exist at different levels of authority and leverage their positions to gain social, cultural and economic capital, with the aim to easily convert one to another in service of lobbying for policy targets. Those described in this paper primarily use WhatsApp as their vehicle for those aspirations. While WhatsApp may not offer the technical affordances other platforms provide, it does have four important features for African elites.

- First, groups are private, invitation only and have a limit.
- Second, it has lower costs of dissemination relative to other platforms.
- Third, while there are performative elements, elites can directly communicate with one another without the mediation of their staff or organizations. WhatsApp messages go directly to personal devices, cutting through a proliferation of information. This makes what is passed over these networks more vital.
- Fourth, WhatsApp is a means to generate attention through self-presentation strategies, adopting subject positions and undertaking labor to advance policy projects.

This is a good point to return to the two research questions that drove this project. The first was whether the use of WhatsApp could or would alter the distribution of power in the policy formation process. In my estimation, I do not think that this will occur, at least in the short term. Participants like Angula, who come from smaller countries, are hoping to use their small network to launch into more established groups. Kwame’s observation about “pockets of hyper-connected” individuals suggests that the use of WhatsApp is likely to reinforce a ‘link culture’. Without being a known entity, Angula’s work may circulate among the “hyper-connected”, like Kumah’s network, but he might not. And even if Angula was invited into more selective WhatsApp groups, given the limitations on numbers, many of their peers might not be able to join. The cap on group sizes allows existing elite networks to argue that they are not cloistering themselves; rather the platform does not have the affordances to be more inclusive. By preserving their command posts, elite policy influencers seek to retain an existing organization of power when it comes to policy goals. This conservative posture reproduces some kinds of social inequalities and exclusions, even while these elites
are working in good faith to address enduring inequalities and exclusions set in motion by imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism.

My point about intersecting inequalities connects to the second research question which was whether elites view their policy influencer work as effective at policy formation. As mentioned earlier, social processes are entwined with knowledge of them. In this regard, WhatsApp groups are extraordinarily good at incorporating other’s direct observations — either in the form of circulated essays or news pieces — into a larger analysis of current affairs. When reflecting upon their own performances as administrators, Kwame and Nkabinde, for example, emphasized that they believed their work was effective at conveying the ‘sticking points’ that affect intra-African trade. In this respect, these groups understand trade and digital divides in historical terms. So are policy influencers effective in the policy formation process? If one includes the solicitation of broad and specific experiences about protocols, barriers and enablers to trades, then policy influencers are contributing to African trade integration. How much so is another question, and this leads me to my final point.

Without any visible metrics to participants, policy influencers do not know how much attention their ideas received. However, the absence of metrics allowed them to act ‘as if’ their intimate ties and professional poise remained intact, strong and stable. While the interviewees indicated that they were interested in shaping continental discourse and policy agenda and not interested in engaging in online spectacles, the lack of metrics creates an environment where they are not crassly competing for attention. This gives the groups and administrators the posture of a seriousness of purpose. Recalling Pang and Woo’s topology of visibility, passive facilitation and relational labour, from my observations the participants in this study tended to actively undertake relational labour to create an environment of ‘presumed visibility’. What I mean is policy influencers did not seek to test audience reception, they simply acted as if their audience was always attentive to what they had to say. It would be too rudimentary to attribute this to issues of psychology. Rather elites understood that they were acting in public and presented themselves in accordance with their online norms.

From this very small study, it appears as if African elites are replicating their existing networks on WhatsApp. While the app helps aspiring elites carve out a place for their ambitions, and the forwarding feature does exist, the siloed nature of WhatsApp groups makes it difficult for these aspirants to have their ideas seen and heard by persons that occupy higher positions in various regional organizations that traverse the African continent. This is not to say that aspirants might not be incorporated into the existing elite but rather that it is but one factor in elite consolidation. As it pertains to social inequalities and remedies, policy influencers are hoping to use trade dividends to generate equity through greater economic participation. Yet the organization of the platforms that carry this advocacy means that ‘influence in a networked world’ is shaped by a kind of digital divide where the people that could benefit most from economic participation are not participating in those very discussions. As part of the ongoing larger transformation where social life increasingly relies upon messaging technologies for coordination and social reproduction (Cruz and Harindranath, 2020), Treré (2020) showed that activists have made WhatsApp a useful tool for social justice movements, becoming a means to create collective identities and formulate demands. Similarly, the app also provides a means for elites to organize themselves to help accomplish their policy goals and safeguard their collectives. In Africa, at least, WhatsApp is becoming part of the policy formation process, although there is room for it to greatly increase meaningful participation.

About the author

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Notes

1. Founded in 2009 and acquired by Facebook in 2014, WhatsApp has the capacity to support text, photo, video and voice messaging, as well as group messaging functions. The app is particularly popular in places that have economic constraints or relatively less developed ICT infrastructure (see Bualch, et al. [2020] and Cruz and Harindranath [2020] for a basic ‘biography’ of WhatsApp).


3. This study of online policy influencers is part of a larger project that looks at the effect of political and economic elites in digital society (see Timcke 2021, 2017). But whereas as prior outputs focused on the United States, this component looks at influence in consolidating networked African world.


11. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


21. Ibid.

References


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