

Portland

Outside influencers dominate Twitter during African elections

Portland study finds that the majority (53%) of the leading voices on Twitter around African elections, held over the past year, came from outside the country in which the elections were contested.

Nairobi, 18 July 2018 – For its fourth ‘How Africa Tweets’ study, Portland, an international strategic communications agency, analysed thousands of Twitter handles to determine the location and profession of the most influential voices driving Twitter conversation during 10 recent African elections.

The study assessed the top hashtags used during elections in Angola, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Rwanda, Senegal and Somaliland between June 2017 and March 2018 and analysed the influencers of those conversations.

Media outlets, journalists, bots and accounts campaigning for a cause or issue - such as encouraging women to vote - were found to be the most influential voices on Twitter during the elections. Notably, politicians and political parties were less influential, accounting for less than 10 per cent of influence in 9 of the 10 elections studied.

The key findings of Portland’s study were:

- **The majority (53 per cent) of leading voices came from outside the country in which the elections were contested.** Of these external voices, on average just over half (54%) were from outside Africa. The US, UK and France, in that order, were home to the most influential non-African voices shaping election conversations on Twitter. While, South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya, were the most influential African countries. In Liberia and Equatorial Guinea, voices from outside the continent – specifically from the US – accounted for the largest share of influential voices in the election overall.
- **Bots and accounts displaying machine-like behaviour were active across all the elections.** In Kenya, bots accounted for a quarter of influential voices. In contrast, in Rwanda, bots accounted for just four per cent of influential voices. Across all elections, bots served primarily to agitate, pushing negative narratives about major issues, candidates, and perceived electoral abnormalities. Following the elections, many bots had their election content removed, with some turning their attention to discussions outside Africa.
- **Politicians and political parties were not the main drivers of conversations in their countries, with local journalists and news outlets having a much greater influence.** In Kenya, the number of politicians influencing the Twitter discussion doubled between the first and second elections, but still failed to reach 10 per cent. In Senegal, no politicians were identified among the influential handles. However, there was a notable exception in Rwanda where 1 in every 3 influential handles was a political account - the highest figure across all elections analysed.

- **Although politicians and political parties were not necessarily influential on Twitter, the top hashtags used around each election often included direct references to them, including #umaangolaparatodos (Angola) and #Weah (Liberia).** Kenya was a clear exception, where the top hashtags were either generic #electionske2017 or centred on the issues around the election including #nowweknow and #noreformsnoelections.
- **Non-domestic news outlets and journalists accounted for 1 in 5 of the handles fuelling discussion and debate around the ten elections.** In Angola, this rose to 2 in every 5. Even in the elections where journalists and news outlets shared a lower influence, they were still the top most authoritative voices.

Robert Watkinson, Portland's Partner for Africa said:

“Our study is the first of its kind to systematically analyse which influencers are shaping the debate on Twitter during African elections. It reveals a complicated space in which multiple voices - often from outside the country in question - have impact. For any organisation wanting to engage its target audiences and shape conversation in Africa, Twitter remains an influential platform to engage institutional voices around key moments.”

Portland's Partner and Head of Strategy P A Research Creative, Gregor Poynton said:

“This is the first piece of thought leadership that Portland has launched utilising the integrated expertise of our newly formed unit SPARC. The team designed a bespoke methodology using a cutting edge social intelligence tool and mapped each account handle to understand the networks of influence behind each election. We are delighted to share our findings today, which include a release of the data set analysed.”

To read the full report please visit www.howafricatweets.com

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Notes to the Editor

Portland (www.portland-communications.com) is a strategic communications agency which specialises in offering integrated reputation management, digital engagement, branding and public affairs advice to major corporations, governments, and international organisations. Founded in 2001, Portland global teams support clients in more than 85 countries.

In publishing its fourth biennial “How Africa Tweets” study, Portland leads the way in knowledge of the digital landscape in Africa. Past studies have identified the top tweeting countries, Africa's top tweeting cities and languages, and the continent's top hashtags.

To collect data for this study, Portland used social media analysis platform Sysomos to extract Twitter data on the most authoritative voices for the most used hashtags in each election. This resulted in a list of more than 1,000 influencers who were then coded manually by location and profession to understand who has been driving the elections conversation on Twitter.

Certain elections were then selected as case studies and a qualitative review of the conversation was then conducted to understand the nuances of each influencer's contribution to the debate.

Contact

Kenya

Simon Crump

M: +254 791 398 792

HAT@portland-communications.com

London

James Nickerson

D: +44 20 7554 1727

M: +44 79394 88048

HAT@portland-communications.com