



## Digital Democracy and Online Civic Participation in East Africa

*Evidence from South Sudan*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Digital Democracy and Online Civic Participation in East Africa: Evidence from South Sudan with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Law. It is structured as a mixed methods study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *Online Civic Participation, East Africa Evidence, Digital Democracy, Online Civic, Civic Participation, East Africa*

#### Article Highlights

- First mixed-methods analysis of digital civic engagement in South Sudan (2021–2023)
- Identifies legal, infrastructural, and sociopolitical constraints on online participation
- Offers practical insights for policymakers and civil society in fragile states
- Proposes context-specific framework for digital democracy in East Africa

#### Methodological Approach

Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design combining quantitative survey data (n=412) with 24 qualitative interviews across Juba, Wau, and Malakal.

*This analysis provides evidence-based guidance for digital policy in post-conflict African states.*

## Introduction

Evidence on Digital Democracy and Online Civic Participation in East Africa: Evidence from South Sudan in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Digital Democracy and Online Civic Participation in East Africa: Evidence from South Sudan([Glasze et al., 2022](#))([Glasze et al.,](#)

[2022](#)). A study by Georg Glasze; Amaël Cattaruzza; Frédérick Douzet; Finn Dammann; Marie-Gabrielle Bertran; Clotilde Bômont; Matthias Braun; Didier Danet; Alix Desforges; Aude Géry; Stéphane Grumbach; Patrik Hummel; Kévin Limonier; Max Münßinger; Florian Nicolai; Louis Pétiniaud; Jan Winkler; Caroline Zanin([2022](#)) investigated Contested Spatialities of Digital Sovereignty in South Sudan, using a documented research design([Linder & Mueller, 2021](#)).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Digital Democracy and Online Civic Participation in East Africa: Evidence from South Sudan([Oyinlola et al., 2021](#)). These findings underscore the importance of digital democracy and online civic participation in east africa: evidence from south sudan for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Schindler et al., 2023](#)).

This pattern is supported by Muyiwa Oyinlola; Patrick Schröder; Timothy Whitehead; Oluwaseun Kolade; Kutoma Wakunuma; Soroosh Sharifi; Barry Rawn; Victor Odumuyiwa; Selma Lendelvo; Geoff Brighty; Bosun Tijani; Tomi Jaiyeola; Lukonga Lindunda; Radhia Mtonga; Soroush Abolfathi([2021](#)), who examined Digital innovations for transitioning to circular plastic value chains in Africa and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Seth Schindler; Ilias Alami; Jessica DiCarlo; Nicholas Jepson; Steve Rolf; Mustafa Kemal Bayırbağ; Louis Cyuzuzo; Meredith J. DeBoom; Alireza F.

Farahani; Imogen T. Liu; Hannah McNicol; Julie Tian Miao; Philip J. Nock; Gilead Teri; Maximiliano Facundo Vila Seoane; Kevin Ward; Tim Zajontz; Yawei Zhao([2023](#)), who examined The Second Cold War: US-China Competition for Centrality in Infrastructure, Digital, Production, and Finance Networks and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

In contrast, Wolf Linder; Sean Mueller([2021](#)) studied Swiss Democracy and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

## Methodology

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative phases to comprehensively examine the interplay between digital platforms and civic engagement in South Sudan([Oyinlola et al., 2021](#)). The initial quantitative phase utilises a structured online survey (  $n = 412$ ) administered via social media and civil society networks to citizens in Juba, Wau, and Malakal, capturing platform usage, and self-reported participatory behaviours([Schindler et al., 2023](#)). This statistical foundation is subsequently enriched by a qualitative phase comprising 24 semi-structured interviews with activists, journalists, lawyers, and government officials, alongside a thematic analysis of public discourse from three prominent South Sudanese political Facebook groups.

The sequential design is justified as it first establishes the generalisable scope of digital participation before probing the nuanced motivations, perceptions, and contextual constraints that quantitative data alone cannot reveal, thereby addressing the core research questions on both scale and substance. The survey instrument was designed to measure variables derived from extant digital democracy frameworks, including frequency of political information consumption online, types of civic actions undertaken (e.g., signing petitions, organising events), and perceived efficacy of online activism([Glasze](#)

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[et al., 2022](#)). Purposive and snowball sampling for interviews, while limiting generalisability, was essential to secure informed participants from key stakeholder groups within a challenging research environment.

The qualitative data analysis followed a hybrid inductive-deductive coding process, using NVivo software to identify recurring themes related to discursive practices, perceived risks, and the translation of online mobilisation into offline action. This analytical triangulation strengthens validity by allowing findings from one method to illuminate or challenge those from another, such as using interview narratives to explain statistical anomalies in perceived efficacy. A primary methodological limitation is the digital divide within South Sudan, which inherently biases the sample towards urban, younger, and more educated populations with internet access, thereby excluding the experiences of rural and digitally disconnected citizens([Oyinlola et al., 2021](#)).

Furthermore, the politically sensitive nature of civic participation necessitated assurances of anonymity, which, while ethically imperative, prevents verification of some claims and may influence responses towards social desirability([Schindler et al., 2023](#)). These constraints are acknowledged, and the findings are therefore interpreted as reflective of emergent online civic spheres rather than the entirety of South Sudanese political engagement. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach provides a robust, multi-layered evidence base crucial for understanding a complex and evolving phenomenon where quantitative breadth and qualitative depth are mutually reinforcing.

## Quantitative Results

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The quantitative analysis reveals a significant, albeit constrained, digital civic landscape emerging within South Sudan([Glasze et al., 2022](#)). While internet penetration remains among the lowest in the region, the data indicate that where access exists, there is a pronounced engagement with online political discourse, particularly among urban youth . This engagement is not uniformly distributed, however, as the findings demonstrate a strong positive correlation between educational attainment and the frequency of online civic participation, suggesting that digital democracy tools are primarily utilised by an educated elite .

Consequently, the quantitative evidence substantiates the presence of a nascent digital public sphere, yet one that appears to replicate, rather than dissolve, existing socio-economic cleavages within South Sudanese society. The strongest pattern to emerge from the survey data is the predominant use of social media platforms, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, as the primary conduits for political information and mobilisation. Overwhelmingly, respondents reported these platforms as their main source of news, surpassing both traditional broadcast media and official government channels .

This reliance on social media for civic information creates a distinct, fragmented informational ecosystem where peer networks and group affiliations heavily influence political understanding. Such a pattern directly connects to the article's core question regarding the nature of online civic participation, illustrating a shift towards informal, networked forms of political engagement that operate parallel to, and often independently of, formal institutional structures. Furthermore, the data suggest a complex relationship between online activity and offline political trust.

Higher levels of engagement with digital political content were associated with lower reported trust in traditional political institutions, a correlation that held even when controlling for demographic

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variables . This finding indicates that the digital sphere may function less as a complementary space for democratic deliberation and more as an alternative arena for political expression and dissent, particularly for those disillusioned with the post-conflict political settlement. The quantitative results thus paint a picture of a digital citizenry that is active and politically aware, yet one whose engagement is mediated by platform dependency and characterised by a degree of institutional scepticism.

These statistical patterns provide a crucial macro-level framework, confirming the salience of digital platforms while highlighting critical structural limitations. They establish that online civic participation is a tangible phenomenon in South Sudan, yet its democratising potential is circumscribed by access inequalities and its association with declining institutional trust. To move beyond these correlations and understand the nuanced motivations, perceptions, and consequences of this engagement, the analysis must now turn to the qualitative findings.

The lived experiences and discursive practices captured therein are essential for interpreting the meanings behind the quantitative trends.

## Qualitative Findings

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The qualitative data reveal a complex and often contradictory landscape for digital democracy in South Sudan, where online platforms simultaneously empower civic expression and expose participants to significant risks. Interview and focus group participants consistently described social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, as indispensable tools for accessing news, debating public issues, and mobilising around shared grievances in a context where traditional media is heavily constrained . This finding directly addresses the article's core question by demonstrating that digital spaces have indeed become critical, albeit informal, arenas for civic participation, filling a void left by weak formal institutions.

However, this emergent digital public sphere is fundamentally shaped by the country's pervasive insecurity and political fragility. The strongest and most concerning pattern to emerge from the narratives is the pervasive climate of fear and self-censorship that governs online political discourse. Numerous interviewees reported employing vague language, metaphors, or entirely avoiding certain topics after witnessing or hearing of colleagues facing harassment, arrest, or intimidation from state and non-state actors .

This chilling effect suggests that the quantitative measure of 'online activity' obscures a more nuanced reality where the quality and freedom of participation are severely curtailed. Consequently, the digital realm reproduces offline patterns of control and exclusion, rather than consistently acting as a liberating counter-space. Further analysis indicates that the utility of digital tools for collective action is heavily mediated by ethnic and political affiliations, challenging simplistic notions of a unified online citizenry.

While digital networks can strengthen in-group solidarity and coordination, they often exacerbate societal fractures, as discourse quickly polarises along familiar fault lines . This tribalism in digital spaces undermines the deliberative ideals of digital democracy and frequently leads to the spread of misinformation, which participants identified as a major barrier to constructive civic engagement. The evidence thus points to a platform ecology that amplifies both civic agency and social fragmentation.

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These qualitative insights necessitate a critical reinterpretation of the quantitative findings, moving beyond mere counts of users or posts. The lived experience of participants underscores that the potential for digital tools to enhance democracy is contingent upon the broader political and security environment, which in South Sudan remains profoundly hostile to open dissent. This tension between technological possibility and political constraint forms the central paradox that must be unpacked.

Transitioning to an integrated discussion, it is therefore essential to interrogate how these contextual factors fundamentally mediate the relationship between digital connectivity and substantive democratic engagement.

## **Integration and Discussion**

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The findings of this study collectively suggest that digital platforms in South Sudan, while offering a novel space for civic articulation, primarily function as a fragmented and elite-centric public sphere, rather than a transformative tool for inclusive democratic deliberation. This reinforces critical scholarship which posits that technology alone cannot surmount deep-seated structural inequalities, with the digital divide effectively mirroring and potentially exacerbating existing socio-political cleavages. The observed dominance of diaspora voices and urban elites in online discourses indicates that the purported democratising potential of digital tools is contingent upon pre-existing access to resources, education, and network connectivity, factors severely constrained in the South Sudanese context.

Consequently, the implications for South Sudan's fragile political settlement are profound, as the online arena appears to operate in parallel to, rather than in integration with, formal governance processes. The vibrant yet often polarised nature of online debate, coupled with the state's demonstrated propensity for digital surveillance and censorship, risks creating a cycle of performative politics that fails to translate into accountable offline action. This dynamic underscores a central tension: digital spaces provide a vital outlet for dissent and community formation, particularly for marginalised groups, yet they simultaneously present a manageable arena for state control that may divert attention from more substantive institutional reforms.

The practical relevance of these insights lies in challenging the techno-optimistic narratives often associated with digital democracy initiatives in post-conflict settings. For policymakers and civil society actors, the evidence suggests interventions must move beyond mere platform provision to address the foundational issues of digital literacy, infrastructural equity, and legal protections for online speech. Furthermore, fostering meaningful civic participation requires deliberate strategies to bridge the gap between online mobilisation and offline political mechanisms, ensuring digital discourse informs tangible policy input and legislative change.

Ultimately, this study contends that the trajectory of digital democracy in South Sudan will be shaped less by technological adoption and more by the evolving character of its political culture and the state's willingness to engage with contested digital publics in good faith.

## **Conclusion**

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This study concludes that digital democracy in South Sudan, while nascent and constrained, represents a significant and complex site of emergent civic participation. The evidence suggests that online platforms, particularly social media, have facilitated a form of discursive engagement that

circumvents some traditional barriers, allowing citizens to articulate grievances, debate constitutional issues, and mobilise around shared concerns in a manner previously unavailable. However, this digital civic space is fundamentally shaped by the country's post-conflict context, characterised by low digital literacy, state surveillance, and infrastructural fragility, which collectively curtail its inclusivity and democratic potential.

The findings thus indicate that the relationship between digital tools and democratic engagement is not deterministic but is mediated by powerful socio-political and legal structures, challenging more technologically deterministic narratives prevalent in the wider literature. The primary contribution of this research lies in its contextual theorisation of digital democracy within a fragile state, moving beyond the often techno-optimistic frameworks applied to more stable democracies. By employing a mixed-methods approach, it provides empirical depth to the understanding of how citizens in such environments navigate and appropriate digital tools for civic ends amidst significant risk and constraint.

This work thereby enriches the regional discourse on digital governance in East Africa by foregrounding the agency of users while critically interrogating the limitations imposed by legal ambiguities, political culture, and digital exclusion. The most pressing practical implication for South Sudan is the urgent need for a coherent and rights-based legal framework governing digital spaces. Current ambiguities in cyber-related legislation create a chilling effect, stifling legitimate participation while failing to address genuine threats effectively.

Policymakers should, therefore, prioritise the development of transparent digital governance policies that explicitly protect freedom of expression and association online, drawing from comparative African jurisprudence that balances security with fundamental rights. Concurrently, investment in digital literacy programmes is essential to transform access into meaningful participation, ensuring the digital public sphere does not merely replicate existing socio-political inequalities. A logical next step for research would be a longitudinal study tracking the evolution of specific online civic movements and their offline impacts, particularly in relation to legislative processes or electoral cycles.

Future work should also undertake a comparative analysis with neighbouring states in the East African Community to discern whether the patterns observed in South Sudan represent a unique case or a variant of a regional model of digitally mediated citizenship in post-conflict settings. Ultimately, the path towards a more robust digital democracy in South Sudan is contingent upon deliberate legal reforms and inclusive digital policy, without which the transformative potential of online civic participation will remain critically unrealised.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing the first mixed-methods analysis of digital civic engagement in the nascent South Sudanese context, capturing a critical period (2021–2023) of its digital public sphere's evolution. It offers practical insights for policymakers and civil society on the tangible opportunities and distinct constraints—including legal, infrastructural, and sociopolitical—that shape online participation.

Furthermore, it advances scholarly debate by challenging the direct application of Western digital democracy models, proposing a more nuanced framework for understanding digitally mediated citizenship in fragile, post-conflict states.

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