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How did the loss of local language newspapers impact the 2021 general elections and democracy in Uganda?

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Abstract

This research is intended to establish the impact of the loss of three local language newspapers on the January 2021 general elections and democracy in Uganda. In the previous elections, the papers were used to deliver candidates' campaign messages to voters.

They were shutdown during the COVID-19 lockdown as the distributors and vendors could not access readers. The English New Vision newspaper – which owned the three publications – shut them down following a decline in circulation and advertising revenue during the pandemic.

The research relied on semi-structured interviews with the vernacular language newspaper readers and journalists who worked for the three publications. The findings show that the shutdown of the papers had a serious impact on the elections and democracy as voters went to the polling stations without sufficient information on candidates and their political agendas.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and context of the case

Uganda is a collection of diverse ethnic communities that united at independence on 9 October 1962 to forge a political union. As Chibita and Fourie (2007) note, Ugandan communities have unique languages and customs. This informed the media systems the colonial government and post independence regimes established to facilitate communication.

Matovu (1990) states that print was the first media genre in Uganda and the maiden newspaper was established by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1897. Uganda's first newspaper, which was an English language quarterly publication before becoming a periodical, served as a medium of communication between missionaries in Uganda and their counterparts on leave in Britain (Matovu, 1990).

However, Isoba (1980) notes that the name of Uganda's first newspaper is not documented and many researchers instead cite *Mengo Notes* – also established by the CMS in 1900 – as the country's maiden paper. Matovu explains that the CMS and Roman Catholic Church established two Luganda language newspapers to disseminate information to the indigenous Anglican and Catholic communities in 1907 and 1911 respectively. The Luganda language is one of the widely spoken languages in the country and belongs to the Baganda ethnic community in central Uganda, which includes the capital Kampala, where the missionary and colonial activities were initially concentrated.

According to Isoba (1980), the period between 1950s and 1960s saw the expansion of Uganda's newspaper industry, but many closed over circulation and distribution challenges and harassment from the colonial establishment as they were used to call for independence. The majority were local language newspapers. Some had been established by Ugandan nationalists.

Matovu's study shows that, 17 out of the 19 newspapers that were in operation Uganda by 1961 were being published in diverse local languages, spoken in the country's four regions – central, eastern, northern and western. Only *Uganda Argus*, a colonial government newspaper, and *New Day*, were English publications by that time. Matovu's research shows that the government, through its Department of Information, owned five local language publications out of 17. In 1954, according to Matovu (1990), the colonial government established Uganda Broadcasting Services as a public broadcaster to complement newspapers. The post independence government renamed it Radio Uganda and established Uganda Television in 1963.

In 1971, army commander, Idi Amin, toppled Uganda's first Prime Minister, Milton Obote, and changed the name of *Uganda Argus* newspaper to *Voice of Uganda*. He maintained the four local language newspapers – *Omukulembeze*, a Luganda publication for central region, *Apupeta*, published in Ateso for the eastern, *Won Lwak* for Luo speaking in the north and *Omwebembezi* published in Runyoro/ Rutoro for the western.

In 1980, Obote returned to power through an election after the toppling of Amin by Ugandan and Tanzanian forces a year earlier. Obote changed the title of the government newspaper to *Uganda Times*. The current National Resistance Movement regime changed it to *New Vision* newspaper upon seizing the reins of government after a five-year guerrilla campaign led by Yoweri Museveni in 1986.

However, the regional local language newspapers collapsed during the civil war, but the Museveni government reinstated them under new titles, *Bukedde* (central), *Etop* (east), *Orumuri* (west), and *Rupiny* (north). Except *Bukedde*, the three newspapers were shut down during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown as distributors could not find readers and the government's English newspaper – *New Vision* – which owned the papers could no longer run them because its circulation figures and advertising revenue declined during the same period (Muhindo, 2020).

As Chibita and Fourie (2007) state access of journalism in indigenous languages is essential for the participation of the majority Ugandans in democratic processes since the English newspapers are consumed by a small urban elite population. Because ethnic communities remain significant vehicles for political debates in Uganda (Chibita and Fourie, 2007), the loss of news accessible through vernacular newspapers represents a threat to democracy. This study is timely and will investigate the impact the loss of local language newspapers had on the January 2020 elections and democracy in Uganda.

It seeks to establish how the readers that previously relied on the three papers for news on political campaigns and elections received this information without the publications, and how it affected their electoral decisions.

The project will also establish how the loss of the papers affected the way journalists covered the elections. Although this study is not comprehensive as it involves a fraction of readers of the three newspapers, and was conducted over a short period of time, it makes a significant contribution of expanding the existing literature on the subject and knowledge on the effect of loss of vernacular language newspapers on elections and democracy.

1.1. Research objectives

Main objective: to investigate the impact of the loss of three local language newspapers on the January 2021 elections and democracy in Uganda

- 1.** To know how readers that previously relied on the three newspapers for news on political campaigns and elections received this information without the papers
- 2.** To know how journalists who worked for the three defunct newspapers covered the elections
- 3.** To bridge the existing gap in literature on the impact of loss of vernacular newspapers on elections and democracy

Chapter 2: Literature review

The literature review will be presented under the following thematic areas; the newspaper industry and democracy, journalism in Africa and the internet.

Newspapers and Democracy

This section will focus on the newspaper industry from a global perspective. It will provide a brief history of the newspaper industry before delving into existing literature on the loss of some print publications witnessed over the past few years. This section will concentrate on the United States for two reasons. First, a big part of the existing literature on the subject relates to the newspaper industry in the US. Second, the African print media is modeled and heavily influenced by the western media, specifically the US and the UK.

In addition, the development of the newspaper industry in Africa has been influenced by its evolutionary processes in the West and now in both places the print media are grappling with similar challenges in the face of digital revolution. Therefore, it makes sense to review literature on the print media in the West for a study involving Africa.

As already stated, the bulk of the research on the development of the newspaper industry and the loss of print publications has concentrated on the developed countries. One of the most recent surveys on the development of the newspaper industry was done by Anderson et al (2016). The research shows that first newspaper was established in Germany in the 1600s.

More newspapers, according to the survey, were established later in the Netherlands, London and the US between 1600s and 1700s. Because of the vital role the newspapers played in circulating information across communities, the researchers show that, the early print publications were not only set up in large towns, especially in the US, but also in small towns. In the US, the post communication system that was up and running by 1800s, the research indicates, was crucial in the circulation of the newspapers and the government subsidized the distribution of news through discounted postal rates and free delivery of mails between newspapers.

This, according to the study, was a shot in the arm for the newsgathering machinery of the newspapers as it meant that papers easily reprinted items from other newspapers for distribution as part of their content without a charge. The development of the newspaper sector in the US is attributed to the fact that a paper was regarded as “an emblem of the community (Anderson et al, 2016, p. 22) and was used by communities to attract new settlers to boost the economic fortunes of areas that had small populations and limited resources.

Yet as the authors point out, it is the penny press that popularised the newspapers and encouraged their mass production as they became cheap, and focused on local issues that appealed to the ordinary Americans like crime and courts cases in the 1830s. The other factor responsible for the mass production of newspapers was the several languages spoken by immigrants in the US like German, Danish and Italian. By the time the world was engulfed in World War I, according to Anderson et al (2016), the US boasted of 1,300 dailies and weeklies.

According to Belonsky (2018), the penny press revolutionised the newspaper industry as it focused reportage on local issues like sports, crime, scandals and gossip. The New York Sun, the *Evening Transcript*, the *New York Herald*, the *Boston Daily Times*, Philadelphia *Public Ledger* newspaper went for as low as one US cent compared to six cent – the price for the papers that focused on nonlocal issues.

The readers, Belonsky argues, came to appreciate the newspapers as they saw themselves and local issues in the press. In emphasizing the value the penny press injected into journalism, Belonsky states that, without *the Sun* and its successors, the world would not have known about the Boss Tweed's corruption, the unsafe and unfair labour conditions in the early 20th century, the inside information about Vietnam and Watergate scandals and the civil rights movement would not have succeeded.

Before the first penny press newspapers emerged on the scene in 1833 journalism was mainly delivered through two major kinds of publications – papers financed by political parties and trade journals funded by the business community (Daxton, 2012). Daxton (2012) explains that the first penny press paper was the *New York Morning Post* – which shutdown after a few days of its launch – but paved way for the emergence of penny press newspapers that changed the journalism landscape as they reported on constituencies like immigrants that were not reported about by papers funded through political and business interests. The role played by the availability of local news in diverse languages in the growth of the print media necessitates this research.

This highlights how accessibility of local news in diverse languages facilitates democracy and information flows across communities. This study builds on the existing literature by investigating the impact of the loss of three Ugandan local language newspapers on elections and democracy.

It's now close to 200 years since the emergence of the newspapers and this industry has witnessed developments with grave implications on its survival. A study by Abernathy (2018), for instance, shows that nearly 1,800 US local newspapers have folded since 2004, including 60 dailies and 1,700 weeklies. The loss of local news, according to Abernathy, results in the loss of sense of community and diminishes trust in democracy.

Koltsova (2008) has defined democracy as the ability for the citizenry to participate in the processes of making decisions essential for the development of their communities. The local newspapers nourish democracy and enable communities thrive as they keep people informed about the local issues (Abernathy, 2018).

Abernathy (2018) also shows that half of the 3,143 US counties now have only one newspaper and 200 do not have any print publication. Yet, as Abernathy demonstrates, the people without access to newspapers are the most vulnerable – they are the poorest, least educated and most isolated. The surviving regional newspapers, she adds, have scaled back their coverage as the crisis triggered by the loss of advertising revenue continues to bite. Around 1,400 communities that had newspapers over a decade ago have no coverage today, the research states.

This has given rise to news deserts. Formally defined as a community without a local newspaper, the definition of news deserts has been expanded to take in all communities suffering from substantial decline in access to news and information essential for democracy (Pen America, 2019). Yet the circulation of local news is one of the pathways through which relationships of enduring coexistence are sustained (Coleman et al, 2016). The loss of local news, therefore, denies communities the opportunities to build and sustain relationships.

This study contributes new literature from Uganda and expands the existing knowledge on the effect of loss of local language newspapers on democracy and informational flows across rural communities. In a bid to try to fill the void left by newspapers, the US journalists have teamed up with nonprofits and communities to set up digital platforms to continue delivering local news.

But as Anderson et al (2016) observe, non-profit journalism faces unprecedented challenges due to the unreliability of its business model – relying on fundraising and philanthropy.

According to a study by Pen America, an association for journalists and writers, the digital start-ups set up by journalists have not been successful and may not fill the void left by newspapers as their reporting is focused on major regional cities. This study will establish if there are any efforts by Ugandan journalists to continue to produce local news after the closure of the papers. The fact that three rural communities went to the polls in January 2021 without the newspapers they previously relied on for information on campaigns and elections makes the study even timely.

In addition, the existing research on loss of local news has focused on the English language newspapers in the US regions that are more developed, with internet access and modern communication infrastructure.

This study will not only look at the loss of local newspapers, but also the disappearance of news previously accessible in vernacular languages. Therefore, it doesn't only add literature to the study of loss of local news, but also brings out new information on the implications of the disappearance of news in local languages on democracy and communication.

While it could be argued that the wide spread electronic media, especially radio in Uganda, could fill the void left by newspapers, a research done by Wadbring and Bergstrom (2015) shows that the electronic media are a poorer alternative to print. Their research poses questions of whether the digital media will contribute to educating the people as effectively as newspapers and calls for research on the effects of loss of local news to get a deeper understanding of the problem. This research responds to this call to generate additional knowledge to further illuminate the problem of loss of local news in local languages.

A study by Firmstone and Coleman (2014) shows that there is a strong relationship between the local media and the citizens – which the leaders seek to tap into to reach populations. The study focused on the relationship between Leeds City Council, the Leeds City newspaper, *the Yorkshire Evening Post*, and the residents. It established that the local media are vital to government as they promote consultations between the people and their leaders on issues like budgets.

The study respondents cited the newspaper as one of the platforms through which they engage with government. The newspaper, which is the highest selling non-national daily in Leeds City Council area, according to the researchers, was found to be playing a very important role in reporting on local issues, with politicians taking advantage of its popularity to engage with citizens.

The respondents equated the loss of local media with the end of democracy – highlighting the centrality of the local press in promoting democracy. This research will broaden this field of study by contributing literature on the effect of loss of local news on Ugandan local government elections and democracy.

Journalism in Africa

This section reviews literature on the development of journalism training and practice in Africa. It also deals with the development of the media and existing literature on the role played by the press in fostering democracy on the continent. Specifically, it surveys literature on the print media, including English and local language newspapers, and makes a case for the study of loss of news in vernacular languages.

The journalism training and practice in Africa was modeled on the media systems in Europe and the US where several African journalists have been trained (Skjerdal, 2011). In the 1960s, when several African countries became independent, as Skjerdal (2011) notes, journalism training on the continent was restricted to short courses provided by international non-governmental organisations and foreign press agencies.

However, several universities started offering journalism degrees between 1980s and 1990s amid arguments among scholars and politicians about whether African journalism training and practice should continue to be influenced by the western media systems.

There were also arguments about whether it was ideal to continue to have the African journalists trained in the West by tutors deemed to be unfamiliar with the local conditions or a new brand of journalism training tailored for Africa be crafted and promoted.

As Skjerdal (2011) states, politicians called for a brand of journalism that would promote patriotic reporting devoid of reproduction of western ideologies, but this didn't sit well with scholars and the profession has continued to be influenced by the western media systems.

Hachten (1968) adds that African journalism or communication as it is known today is an import from Europe. The Europeans established newspapers and radio stations to advance imperial projects and until after independence, as Hachten (1968) argues, African journalism was dominated by Europeans as colonial governments barred Africans from engaging in the trade. There were, however, not many media platforms across the continent since colonial governments and their audiences were small. But, today, there are several radio and television stations and English newspapers in Africa.

This has been facilitated by the media liberalisation policies adopted by African governments in the 1990s. These policies saw the states loosen their grip on the press. The several media platforms created avenues for self expression and criticism of governments as several countries moved to multiparty politics (Tettey, 2001).

Over the years, as Tettey (2001) notes, the media have exposed activities within governments that would have otherwise remained unknown and people rely on press reports to weigh politicians' performance against their manifestoes and make informed voting decisions.

This, Tettey (2001) opines, has injected a certain level of accountability and transparency across governments and the media's exposure of corruption has triggered investigations by state agencies. The media continues to educate the people on their democratic and constitutional rights as well as providing alternative views.

This is reinforced by another survey by Akoh and Ahiabenu II (2012) which demonstrates that the African journalism plays a significant role in facilitating voter participation in elections by reporting on the performance of politicians, reporting on polls, and providing a platform for political parties to reach the electorate. This, as Akoh and Ahiabenu II (2012) observe, provides the electorate with information to make informed decisions – which is a crucial ingredient for democracy.

However, the African journalism is mainly accessible to small urban populations as it's delivered in official languages such as English and French (Hachten, 1968; Tettey, 2001). As Tettey (2001) explains African newspapers majorly circulate in urban centres and do not cover issues in rural areas. In a separate study, Kasoma (1995) opines that, even in urban areas, the newspapers are accessed by the rich with means to buy a paper daily and therefore it's the views and demands of the wealthy people that reach governments.

This is buttressed by a study by Nyirubugara (2014) which shows that the mainstream English newspapers do not focus on community issues, leaving majority of Africans who live in rural areas without reliable information sources.

Salawu (2015) argues that the adoption of the colonisers' languages has affected mass communication in indigenous dialects across Africa and led to the rise and collapse of local language newspapers. For instance, according to Salawu (2015), 19 registered local language newspapers that were operational in South Africa in the 1930s are nonexistent today. In Ghana, 15 local languages that were in operation in the 1990s folded. However, as the study shows there are still pockets of local language newspapers in some countries such as South Africa and Nigeria.

The Ugandan newspapers were part of a few local language papers across the continent. This study will contribute literature on the fate of local language newspapers in Africa and the implications of their loss on democracy.

Internet

As already noted above in this chapter, the loss of newspapers in the US has triggered the development of digital platforms to close the vacuum left by the papers. This has been facilitated by the existing internet infrastructure and its low cost in the developed world compared to the same in Uganda and Africa generally.

This section reviews literature on internet access in Africa and makes a case for this study to add to the existing knowledge on the potential and limitations of delivering journalism to rural audiences over the digital platforms. There is a substantial amount of research on internet development and accessibility in Africa. According to Brunet et al (2004), the internet which emerged in the US between 1960s and 1970s and later spread to developed nations appeared much later in Africa.

Although the internet development has been uneven in Africa, the period between 1980s and 1990s witnessed a 92% rise in the deployment of this technology from investment in infrastructure, establishment of internet cafes in urban areas and its adoption by non-governmental organizations (Brunet et al, 2004). However, this rise in internet use, manifested by the growing online communities on the continent, does not imply that Africa is about to catch up with the developed countries in terms of its deployment (Banda et al, 2009).

The authors argue that long standing issues of inaccessibility and economic and power inequalities remain major stumbling blocks to internet adoption.

Banda et al (2009) argue that the online communities emerging across Africa comprise elites that take advantage of institutional resources to access internet. Outside institutional environment, they state, few Africans can access internet. And as Malila (2005) points out, the limited number of rural Africans online impedes attempts to publish content in indigenous languages.

As a result, Atton and Mabweazara (2011) state that internet is not about to replace the traditional media in rural Africa and can only play a complementary role. This study will provide the latest picture on internet access in rural Uganda and contribute to discussions on the future of online local language news production.

In a study that investigated the relationship between internet use and democracy in 38 African countries, Evans (2019) argues that, West African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Senegal and Cote D'ivoire had the highest internet use levels on the continent over the previous ten years.

For example, Nigeria was leading at 47% followed by Ghana at 23%.

In the East African region which comprises Uganda, only Kenya, Mauritius and Seychelles boasted of the highest internet use. For instance, over 46% of Kenyans had access to the internet. The author argued that Kenya's internet penetration put it in the same league with Rwanda and quite ahead of industrialized nations such as Italy, Portugal and China.

In Uganda, only 19% of the population had internet access.

In Southern Africa, South Africa had the highest percentage at over 50% followed by Botswana at nearly 30%. While the study showed a general increase in internet use, as Evans (2019) notes, poor connectivity and prohibitive cost of internet-connected mobile phones continue to lock the rural poor out of the information superhighway. The author argues that most of the institutions like schools and public and private offices in rural areas where majority of Africans live were not connected to internet.

The researcher argues that, with Africa's broadband household penetration recorded at 15.4%, less than ten years ago, far below the world average of 52.3%, the continent was the least connected. In another study, Owusu-Agyei, et al (2020) state that there were around 267 million people (26% of the population) with internet access in sub Saharan Africa in 2018.

However, according to the recently updated information from Internet World Stats (2021), Africa's internet penetration is 39.3% while it is 62.9% in the rest of the world. The statistics also indicate that Kenya now has the highest internet penetration at 85% of the population followed by Libya at 84% and Nigeria at 73%.

The countries where internet penetration is between 60% and slightly over 70% include Cape Verde, Morocco, Gabon, Tunisia, Mauritius and Seychelles. It is beyond 50% in Djibouti, Algeria, Egypt, South Africa, Eswatini, Mali, Namibia, Senegal, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In other countries, it's between 10% to over 40%, with Uganda at 39%. By 2019, over 470 million Africans were connected to mobile phones out of the over 1.2b population (Global System for Mobile Communication, 2020).

Smart phones were projected to constitute half of the mobile phone connections by 2020. This means the number of Africans that can access news content through smart phones is still small.

In a study that examined the use of internet at household level in 17 countries in sub Saharan Africa, Birba and Diagne (2012), argued that, deployment of this technology in families was determined by the availability of connection and family size. In addition, families comprising of five people and fewer are more likely to have internet connections than their counterparts in larger households. In terms of gender, the study shows more men than women in Africa have internet access.

The authors argue that internet use was highest among people under 30 years of age and lowest among persons aged 50 years and above. Additionally, its use is highest among people who have attended high school and higher education and lowest among persons that dropped out of school at primary and those without formal education. Birba and Diagne (2012) also argue that people in areas with highest population density and accessibility to energy and communication services use internet more than counterparts in sparsely populated areas with limited access to social amenities.

This, several scholars have argued, has created the digital divide between the urban and rural areas in countries with poor communication systems, high internet costs and a lack of direct access to the sea (Wakunuma-Zojer and Litho, 2009; Thierry et al, 2015; Lishan, 1996; de Beer, 2001; Birba and Diagne, A. 2012; Paterson, 2013).

For instance, de Beer (2001) argued that countries like Uganda that do not have direct access to the sea bear the highest internet costs globally. However, de Beer (2001) also stated that the smart phone explosion will narrow the digital gap between the urban and rural Africa. This author called for further research into how smart phones will reduce digital divide. This research responds to this call to expand literature on the subject.

But Wakunuma -Zojer and Litho (2009) have already argued that in countries like Uganda and Zambia, the mobile phone and internet deployment is concentrated in capital cities. The authors add that there is widespread shared use of internet in cafes, training institutions and places of work in the two countries. A study by Atton and Mabweazara (2011) indicates that journalists in some African newsrooms queue up and take turns using internet-connected computers.

Paterson (2013), in another study, opines that efforts by journalists to fully embrace mobile and internet-based technologies are hampered by the limited access to the same technologies across Africa. The author explains that internet-based technologies have limited impact beyond the urban middle class populations with affordable and reliable internet access in Africa.

Wakunuma -Zojer and Litho (2009) further argued that shared mobile phone use was common in Uganda and Zambia. They added that rural women were more happy to use phone to place calls rather than the internet-based apps built in the English language. This study will provide fresh literature on the potential of phones and internet to deliver news to the uneducated and poor rural populations in Africa.

Aside from the aforementioned factors inhibiting the use of internet, some schools have cited the prohibitive taxation and regulatory frameworks, including shutdowns, several African governments enforce to restrict internet use (Eleanor, M., and Nicole, S. 2020; Gumede, 2016; Salgado, 2012). For instance, Gumede (2016) cites several countries including Uganda, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia that have recently shutdown the internet to control protests and political activities.

Uganda, as the author notes, shutdown the internet ahead of the 2011 and 2016 elections to deny the opposition the platforms to mobilize the masses against the incumbent government. Uganda blocked the internet again during the 2021 elections on the same grounds. This study partly examines the viability of delivering local news over the internet under the current circumstances in Uganda.

PASS PLE TYE IYIE

Par pi anyim atini, mie jami ducu amite pi kwan ...p11,12,13,14,15

PI DONGO UGANDA
Rupiny

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**CORONA:
TYE AMEDE**

- *Ikare me coc onwongo omako jo 9*
- *Nge diro me gwokere iye ...p2,3, 4,18*



Bishop Linus Wanok tye anyuti jo ngo anyero itim eka cal ma lacuc daktar tye ka pimo laco ni ikom two ma corona I Gulu municipal

TEKWARO: Nyom itekwaro me Lango ikare acon ...p20

NGEC BOT LWAK

Man me miyo okwan papara Rupiny ngec ni acalo adwogi me poto a two corona, pwod obino juku kato a papara man

MANAGEMENT



**Bosmic
Otim omuku
tic i pati
NRM
...p22**

WIBYE 2021



**MP Odonga
bimake ki
omine Onyuk
...p10**

A cover page of *Rupiny* Newspaper. This is one of the issues that were published before the paper folded in 2020

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/rupiny.newspaper.7/photos/2923141974374679>

Epenakisi Ikristayon Bp. Irigei aep ..app 8

KANUKA UGANDA

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app 15-18

Ariebakin ko London app 3

OTAI!



Akerere Osuban India app 4



Elepun MPs lukalanyok app 2



SOROTI: Omolo USUK: Alangot NCOBIA: Epetai AMURIA: Amero FERERE: Alazo SOROTI: Mukula KASTIO: Okupa

Edopo Joshua redio app 5

Epuokunos Ecweru ka Amero.. app 5

A cover page of *Etop* Newspaper

Source:<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=etop.newspaper&set=a.537845182939918>



An image of a cover page of Orumuri Newspaper, one of its last issues

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/orumuri/photos/3003899106344577>

Chapter 3: Methodology

This is a qualitative investigation. A qualitative research is “primarily concerned with understanding human beings’ experiences in a humanistic, interpretive approach” (Jackson II et al, 2007, pp.2). In other words, Jackson II et al (2007, pp.2), argue that, qualitative research is key in understanding human beings “richly textured experiences and reflections about those experiences”.

They add that, instead of limiting the researchers to a set of questions with little chances of eliciting open ended answers, as is the case with quantitative research, qualitative research allows investigators to obtain detailed responses to enquiries. The approach is understood to be humanistic and interpretive on account of the wealth and depth of information it yields during conversations between researchers and respondents, albeit its findings are not generalisable to a population because few people participate in detailed studies.

According to Flick (2007), a qualitative research uses text as empirical material instead of numbers and begins from the idea of the social construction of realities. It is concerned with understanding the perspectives of the respondents – their knowledge and practices and experiences – in relation to the subject under study.

It takes the interpretive and naturalistic approach – studying participants in a natural environment – and relying on things like field notes, interviews, recordings, photos, conversations, among others – to interpret the subject under examination (Flick, 2007).

The qualitative research is the ideal approach to this study because it will involve investigating the impact of the loss of three local language newspapers on the January 2021 elections and democracy in Uganda. The people that were served by the three local language newspapers relied on the same papers for information on candidates and their manifestoes to form voting decisions in the previous elections.

This study seeks to establish how voters learned about candidates and their manifestoes without the newspapers and how that impacted their voting decisions. It will also investigate how the loss of the papers affected the way journalists reported the elections. The researcher chose the qualitative investigation for this study because this approach relies on the use of language to understand ideas based on people's experiences and how reality is socially constructed.

The qualitative research is also an integral part of the field of media studies (Brennen, 2017). This project will rely on semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. An interview is a focused and purposeful conversation between two or more people and can last only minutes, days, weeks or months (Brennen, 2017). In addition, the interview, as method of obtaining knowledge, is an "asymmetrical encounter in which an interviewer solicits information from an interviewee, who relatively passively responds to the interviewer's inquiries" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001, p.12). When the right questions are asked, as Gubrium and Holstein (2001), note, reality about other's feelings and experiences gets revealed.

Interviews can be conducted through a face to face engagement between the interviewer and interviewee, online, email, phones, among others (Brennen, 2017). Interviews are a key method in research because they allow investigators to appreciate how events in the world impact people, how they get interpreted and perceptions formed (Mann, 2016).

According to Chauncey (2013, p.41), a semi-structured interview is “a cross between structured and unstructured interview that allows some standardisation of questions and the freedom to explore and add new questions as unexpected topics emerge” How much gets explored, as Chauncey (2013), argues is determined by the goal of the interview.

Semi-structured interviews involve talking to respondents in a self conscious, orderly and partially structured manner in verbal exchanges (Longhurst, 2010). They flow in a conversational style, allowing the interviewer and interviewee to discuss the matter at hand more deeply although the investigator usually develops a set of predetermined questions on an interview guide for this kind of interview (Edwards and Holland, 2013; Chauncey, 2013).

As Longhurst (2010) observes, semi-structured interviews are arguably the most commonly deployed in qualitative studies.

There is no “magic number of interviews for qualitative research and the number varies depending on the length and depth of the conversations, focus, and information obtained although it’s vital to have as many as possible to get deeper insights (Brennen, 2017, p.32).

Semi-structured interviews also vary in time, but an effort was made to ensure they did not drag on unnecessarily, each lasting not more than 30 minutes, including introduction, rapport and wrapping up (Chauncey, 2013). The questions were asked in a manner that allowed the respondents to respond to the three themes that were explored; elections, local news and internet (Longhurst, 2010).

Data collection

I had initially planned to use semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Focus groups would have enabled me to bring participants together and offer me an opportunity to get to know their opinions about the subject in a group conversation. However, I dropped the focus group approach because I could not travel back to Uganda to get the participants together in a physical environment for the discussion to take place with the COVID-19 restrictions in place. Furthermore, Uganda still had restrictions in place on group meetings to stem the spread of the virus. Against that background, I considered holding the focus group discussions on zoom. But, I then realised, a conversation over zoom, too, was not possible because the participants were based in rural areas where the internet access was poor.

In addition, the participants did not have access to digital tools such as computers that would have enabled me to conduct the focus group discussion on zoom. Holding zoom meetings would have required me to provide the participants with computers and internet.

This would have escalated the costs associated with this project yet the success of the zoom meeting was not guaranteed without my physical presence on the ground to coordinate the process. I settled for in-depth individual interviews as the exclusive data collection method, aware that semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions share similarities.

For instance, both methods involve talking to people in a conversational and semi-structured manner, and each of the two can be used as “a stand-alone method or as a supplement to the other or as a means for triangulation in multi-methods research” (Longhurst, 2010, p.106).

The respondents were selected on the basis of their relevance to the research objectives and purposive interviews were adopted to obtain the information (Bryman, 2012). The generic sampling – a type of purposive sampling – was deployed to develop categories of respondents relevant for the investigation. The categories included editors, reporters and male and female local language newspaper readers.

The snowball sampling, another type of purposive sampling, was later adopted to expand the sample as well as contribute to the achievement of the research goals and representation in terms of readers and journalists with relationship to the three newspapers.

The snowball sampling is a technique that involves a researcher sampling a small group of respondents initially and these interviewees suggest other respondents to participate in the study (Valentine, 2005; Bryman, 2012; Edwards and Holland, 2013).

Phone interviews

The researcher conducted phone interview with 21 respondents. The researcher shared copies of project information sheet and consent form with participants by email and sought verbal consent from each, explaining the aims of the research and how their responses would be anonymized and used only for the purpose of this study (Longhurst, 2010; Chauncey, 2013; Brennen, 2017).

All respondents were above 18 years and were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview anytime during the project. With permission from respondents, their answers were tape-recorded and transcribed as soon as the discussion ended (Longhurst, 2010). In addition, the participants were informed that records of their answers would be deleted from the university database upon completion of the project. The interviews were based on a list of prepared questions but follow-up questions were asked to get the participants to share detailed information.

The phone interviews enabled the interviewer to gather information from widely distributed respondents in the three rural Ugandan communities previously served by the defunct newspapers; western, northern and eastern (Chauncey, 2013; Brennen, 2017).

The phone interviews were the most appropriate option for the study as interviewees were international participants – resident outside the UK. This also enabled the researcher to gather information in a shorter period since no movement was involved.

In addition, the response rate was satisfactory. The researcher conducted mock phone interviews with non-participants before calling respondents to test the functionality of the recording equipment and the phone as well as getting an idea of how the interviews would pan out. However, visual cues were absent from the telephone interviews and the researcher could not know what the respondents were doing at the time of the interview to partly inform some of the research questions (Chauncey, 2013).

The journalists who participated were resident in the three communities and the closure of the papers impacted their reporting of the elections. Interviews with local language newspaper readers gave the researcher an opportunity to understand the impact of the loss of the papers on their voting decisions. The interviews with journalists and readers of the three newspapers constituted primary data sources. The secondary sources were integrated in the research, especially within the literature review.

The researcher interviewed editors and reporters at the now defunct newspapers. They include three from each of the two papers and two from the other paper. All were males and were contacted by email and telephone. The researcher contacted three female journalists but did not succeed in getting them interviewed. A total of thirteen local language newspaper readers were interviewed. Seven were women. The researcher interpreted the data and drew conclusions in accordance with the research topic and questions.

Limitations and strengths

The major limitation to this research method was subjectivity. However, efforts were made to ensure the process of data collection and handling was as transparent as possible to generate credible findings. The other limitation is that data cannot be generalised to wider populations. But this interview method has strengths, too, which will counterbalance the effect of the limitations on the research findings.

The interviews offered the researcher an opportunity to get a deeper understanding of the effects of the closure of the newspapers on people through pre-arranged questions and follow-up questions. The predetermined questions were not asked in a particular order which enabled respondents to discuss at length the issues they deemed important.

Chapter 4: Findings

As stated earlier, a total of 21 respondents were interviewed. Their answers were presented in this section to answer the research question reproduced below.

How did the loss of local language newspapers impact the 2021 elections and democracy in Uganda?

The interviewees comprised fourteen men and seven women. These included fourteen readers of the local language newspapers that folded in 2020 and eight journalists who reported for the same papers. The youngest participant was aged 25 and the oldest 74. Save for three participants, who dropped out of school at Senior Four level, the rest had higher academic qualifications, with the highest being a doctorate.

All participants lived in the three communities previously served by the *Orumuri*, *Etop*, and *Rupiny* newspapers in western, eastern, northern regions respectively. The readers had depended on the same papers for news on political campaigns and elections for over ten years. Nine of the fourteen readers fall under four professional and occupational categories – teaching, health, business, communication and engineering.

The remainder included an academic consultant, a former Uganda government minister, three were informal sector workers – a cook at a secondary school and two casual labourers. These three dropped out of school at Senior Four. Some journalists had worked for the newspapers for over ten years. Others close to ten years.

Three had edited the same newspapers for over five years. While I set out to establish the effect of the closure of the newspapers on elections and democracy, in the course of the study, I also learned two important issues that are unique to Uganda as far as local language papers are concerned. These issues have a bearing on democracy. I list them below before presenting the general findings.

The newspapers carried pullouts containing instructional materials for primary and secondary schools. Respondents, who attributed their passing of national primary and secondary school exams to the education content carried by the three newspapers, were worried that educational standards might collapse since learners in the poorly-resourced rural government schools no longer receive the instructional materials.

The newspapers were key tools for preserving and promoting culture and local languages in communities. Respondents expressed concern that their languages might get extinct as they are no longer written and the newspapers that passed it to generations over the years have fizzled out.

The findings were presented in two parts to demonstrate the impact of the loss of the newspapers on readers and journalists separately in relation to the elections and democracy. The findings were delivered under the following themes; elections and democracy, news and information in local languages and the impact of loss of the papers on reporting.

Newspaper readers

Elections and Democracy

The absence of the three newspapers impacted the decisions of ten of the fourteen respondents who previously formed voting decisions on the basis of information provided by the papers. Participant 19, who works in the capital Kampala, travels to Rwampara, her home district, about 270km away, in western region, to vote.

But she didn't vote several candidates that ran for various positions in the January 2021 elections because she neither knew them nor their manifestoes. This was not the case in the previous elections because she received the candidates' manifestoes through *Orumuri* newspaper. In the January 2021 polls, she only voted her presidential candidate, a parliamentary candidate, a relative who ran for the sub county chairperson position and a district woman councilor aspirant.

"I knew the presidential candidates through the national press. I did not know parliamentary candidates, and I voted only the parliamentary candidate who telephoned me and asked for my vote," she said, "I didn't vote the district chairperson, too, because I didn't know the candidates in the race,"

Previously, this participant explained that she relied on the strength of candidates' manifestoes carried by *Orumuri* newspaper to form her voting decisions.

Participant 21, a cook at a secondary school in Lira district, northern Uganda, did not know the candidates on the ballot papers but voted. Just like participant 19, she previously relied on *Rupiny* newspaper for candidates' profiles and their manifestoes to form her voting decisions.

"The candidates sent their manifestoes and pictures to us through Rupiny previously before they held public campaign rallies," she said.

When the researcher asked her to reaffirm if she voted candidates she neither saw in person nor knew before the polling day, she replied, "Yes,"

Participant 18, who also dropped out of school at Senior Four, like participant 21, said he voted but didn't have information on all candidates. This, he said, would not have been the case if *Rupiny* was in operation because it published candidates' information in the *Luo* language and that informed his voting decisions.

Participant 7, a former government minister and a candidate in the elections, said that in the absence of *Rupiny*, he printed and distributed copies of his manifesto to voters. Previously, he said his manifestoes were carried by *Rupiny*.

"I used to buy between 1,000 and 2,000 copies of *Rupiny* with my manifesto and distribute to people," he said. Participant 10 said *Orumuri* delivered candidates' manifestoes to voters in advance of campaign rallies. However, this time around, presidential aspirants employed interpreters in Isingiro district, in western Uganda at public campaign rallies.

“Previously, by the time candidates came to campaign, we had seen their pictures and manifestoes,” she added, “Now they used interpreters to introduce them to us before campaigning,”

Like participants, 19, 21, 18 and, participant 10 didn’t know all candidates before voting.

Participant 12 said he didn’t know the candidates in the election due to absence of *Etop* and that a new newspaper, *Aicerit*, which has been established to fill the void, doesn’t match *Etop* in terms of coverage. Participants 14 and 17 also said that *Aicerit* only covers issues in Soroti town where it circulates.

In northern Uganda, *Te-ceng* newspaper which was established in June 2020 following the closure of *Rupiny*, folded in December. Participant 17, just like participant 19, said she doesn’t know her current leaders. These two, who work outside their home eastern and western regions, said *Etop* and *Orumuri* would have published names of all elected leaders.

News and information in local languages

The fourteen newspaper readers said the news they previously consumed through the vernacular language papers is absent from the English dailies. Five of the fourteen argued that the vernacular newspapers also preserved their languages and culture. Two said the newspapers’ closure meant loss of permanent records of events across their communities. Three said the schools had lost instructional materials previously delivered through newspapers.

Participant 21, who had read *Rupiny* for over ten years, said that she no longer receives information on women emancipation drives in her community.

“That information came through *Rupiny*. We used to sit down, as women, and journalists took our pictures,” she added.

Participant 9, who organized the emancipation sensitization meetings, said the prospect of being featured in *Rupiny* encouraged women to express their opinions during meetings.

“This was a grassroots newspaper,” she added.

Participant 20, an English language teacher who also holds a doctorate in film studies, has been contributing poems to *Rupiny* newspaper since 1996. He argued that the *Luo* community lost a repository of information. “I cannot deliver poems through radio,” he said.

Participants 7, 14 and 17 said the shutdown of *Rupiny* implies loss of a tool for preserving and enriching the *Luo* language and culture. Participants 16, 14 and 15 attributed their passing of national primary exams between 1995 and 2018 to instructional materials carried by *Etop*.

“The newspaper carried sets of national exams from previous years and published answers. It gave me confidence to compete nationally,” participant 16 said.

Participant 12, a teacher, used *Etop* as a teaching aid under Uganda’s thematic curriculum that encourages tutors to teach pupils to read and write in their mother tongues in lower primary before introducing them to English.

Radio and internet

There are over 200 radio stations in Uganda, with each major district having at least one. I asked the fourteen newspaper readers if the information previously supplied by papers was accessible through radio. They all said the non-event based information newspapers reported is missing from radios. They argued that even the event-based stories are not explored by radio as deeply as newspapers did.

Participant 19 said radios provide a tiny portion of the information that papers supplied. This is supported by participants 12 and 15 who argued radios devote a substantial portion of airtime to entertainment. I asked the fourteen newspaper consumers whether they would be able to access local language newspapers if they were taken online. One out of 21 participants did not own a smart phone. Participant 21, who didn't own a smart phone, said that digital technology is out of her reach.

"Those tools are good but you need money to get them," she added. Participant 20 said that while he could purchase internet data, there are non-smart phone owners, like participant 21, and those who own them but cannot use them to consume news due to high internet costs.

Participant 18 said there were 2,400 people in his village in Lira town, with less than 300 owning smart phones. In addition, participant 14 said there's one smart phone owner in some families comprising ten people. Participant 9, a school headmistress, said only eight out of 30 teachers she leads, own smart phones.

Participant 17 pointed out the absence of electricity in rural areas and internet tax are major obstacles to adoption of digital technology. Furthermore, participants 15 and 16 said the struggle to access basic needs among rural populations overrides the need to acquire digital tools for news consumption. If offered a chance to choose between accessing *Orumuri* newspaper online and offline, participant 10 said she would elect the latter because it's cheaper. "Because I don't have to keep charging a phone to get news," she added.

Participants 4, 8, 11 and 13 – editors and reporters – said there were electronic versions of *Rupiny*, *Orumuri* and *Etop*, but the papers were consumed offline because their readers had limited or no access to internet.

Journalists

I asked the journalists how they covered the elections without the newspapers and if there are events that are not reported due to absence of the papers. They said several election-related issues were not reported and many events don't get reported following the shutdown of the papers. The three newspapers ran a campaign dubbed *People's Manifesto* ahead of every general election.

Under this campaign, participant 11, who edited *Orumuri* for eight years, said the newspaper evaluated the performance of the incumbents and encouraged voters to identify the pressing issues for new leaders to tackle. "This helped readers to weigh the incumbent against new candidates and decide who to vote," he added, "We didn't run it this time around"

Participant 2, who contributed articles to the *People's Manifesto*, said the campaign enabled him to evaluate leaders. This, he argued, engaged readers to identify key issues for politicians and vote candidates with the best ideas to address them. Participant 8, who edited *Rupiny* for 12 years, said the *People's Manifesto* encouraged voters to hold their leaders accountable.

Participant 3, who reported for *Rupiny* 14 years, said the readers kept copies of the newspaper for years and used them to challenge leaders over unfulfilled pledges. Participants 3 and 8 said *Rupiny* published readers' questions to politicians and responses from their leaders on service delivery ahead of election – something that got readers engaged in the political processes and influenced voting.

Participant 13, a former *Etop* editor, stated that the paper also focused on educating people on the function of elections to increase voter turn up through commentaries and news articles.

Participant 1, who presently reports for the Kampala capital city-based national radio and television stations, said events around the last election cannot be traced because the papers that would have recorded them had closed.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis

As indicated by the findings, the closure of the three vernacular language newspapers had a substantial impact on the January 2021 Ugandan general elections. The readers who previously relied on the papers for candidates' profiles and manifestoes voted without sufficient information on aspirants. This impacted their electoral decisions and democracy - the question this study set out to investigate. There are respondents that voted candidates they didn't have sufficient information about. Others voted candidates they didn't know. This is a clear case of how an uninformed society gets easily manipulated by bad leaders – which is a blow to democracy and undermines the value of elections.

The communities have lost news in local languages and education materials previously distributed to schools through newspapers. Many local events are not reported and there are information gaps across communities formally served by the three newspapers.

The existing English newspapers are not accessible to the majority non-English language speakers in rural Uganda. The information previously accessible in local language newspapers is missing from radios and internet is out of reach for the majority. The researcher discusses the findings in detail below.

Democracy and elections

The findings show that some people who previously relied on the three newspapers for information on political campaigns and elections went to the January 2021 polls without knowledge of the candidates in the races. For example, participant 19 did not vote some candidates for lack of information about them and their manifestoes. This, as she pointed out, was not the case with the previous elections because *Orumuri* newspaper published profiles and manifestoes of candidates ahead of elections.

Meanwhile, participant 21 did not know the candidates on the ballot papers but voted them because she thought it was a requirement to vote with or without information about the aspirants. Like participant 19, she previously relied on *Rupiny* newspaper for information about candidates and their manifestoes in advance of the polling day.

Participant 19 has a degree qualification while participant 21 dropped out of school at Senior Four. While participant 19 chose to vote only the candidates who she had some information about, participant 21 voted all candidates, including those she didn't know. This illustrates the effects the loss of newspapers had on the quality and outcome of the elections.

It also shows how the impact on the literate and semi illiterate voters varied. Participants 19 and 17 didn't know the persons who had been elected to various positions by the time of the study – five months after the elections.

This would not been the case with the newspapers in operation as they previously published names and photos of all newly elected leaders after the polls. The voting decision of participant 21 confirms the argument by participant 8, who edited *Rupiny* for 12 years. Participant 8 said that, without the newspaper which previously circulated information about aspirants and their manifestoes, some voters did not have sufficient information about the candidates. This argument was echoed by participant 13, who edited *Etop* newspaper.

“People didn’t know candidates because there was no local source of the political information they needed. But they voted,” he added.

The findings imply that people lacked adequate information to inform their voting decisions.

One of the papers, *Rupiny*, circulated in the northern region which comprises 22 districts, two cities and five municipalities. The findings demonstrate that, even if the national English dailies which circulated in the regions during the electioneering period had covered the local issues, they would not have been accessed by the majority non-English language speakers.

The findings imply that some voters based their voting decisions on half-baked information, and the lack of sufficient knowledge on the electoral processes might have impacted voter turnout.

The absence of newspapers that were previously deployed to generate conversations on the pressing issues and the fact that some voters picked candidates whose manifestoes they didn’t know due to lack of information, deprived the electorate of the power to influence the electoral process and hold leaders accountable.

This undermines the value of elections and democracy. And this is pointed out by Abernathy (2018) in the literature review. This author argues that loss of local news results in the loss of sense of community and diminishes trust in democracy.

The people who voted candidates whose manifestoes they didn't know cannot hold such politicians to account because they do not know their political agendas. In addition, voters like participant 19 who didn't vote some candidates for lack of information about them might have substantially affected the outcome of the polls. It means that the loss of the papers deprived some voters of their right to information and vote. Subsequently, the people who got elected were not voted by some community members.

The findings show that the newspapers served as a bridge between politicians and voters. The loss of the newspapers meant that this bridge was broken. This is arguably best illustrated by the manner in which participant 7, a former government minister conducted his campaigns.

Participant 7 lost his ministerial position 2011 after losing his parliamentary seat, but sought reelection in 2021. In the absence of *Rupiny*, he printed and distributed copies of his manifesto to voters. "Unfortunately, there was no *Rupiny* this time around. I had to print materials and distribute to the people," he said.

But not every candidate deployed this strategy. Yet, even with this strategy, there are some voters who were not reached as confirmed by participant 21 who stated that she voted candidates she did not know.

This, she said, would not have been the case with *Rupiny* newspaper in operation as it previously published manifestoes and candidates' profiles before elections. By publishing the candidates' manifestoes and profiles, the papers were playing an important role of providing people with information they needed to make the right voting decisions in a democracy.

Abernathy (2018) argued local newspapers nourish democracy and enable communities thrive as they keep people informed about local issues. This is also supported by Tettey (2001) who argues in the literature review that people in Africa rely on press reports to weigh politicians' performance against their manifestos and make informed voting decisions.

However, in the absence of the local papers, the findings also show that the first and only time voters saw candidates was at public campaign rallies. This is a blow to democracy. Usually, candidates do not discuss their manifestoes in detail at campaign rallies and these activities are held a few days to the elections.

Meanwhile, the newspapers that were established to fill the void do not match the defunct papers in terms of coverage and content. The findings, for example, show that the *Aicerit* newspaper does not get close to *Etop* in coverage and content. The paper only circulates in Soroti town out of over 10 districts *Etop* previously targeted.

In northern Uganda, *Te-ceng* newspaper which was established following the closure of *Rupiny* in June 2020, folded in December. Although the three defunct newspapers were mainly consumed in three regions, they circulated across the country.

This is because they were produced by Vision Group which has a well developed national distribution network. It distributed the papers together with the national newspaper, *New Vision*. This explains why participant 14 had read *Aicerit*, the new newspaper in eastern Uganda, only twice by the time this study was done, yet it was nearly one year old.

But the participant said she read *Etop* daily when it still in operation. As a result of the shutdown of *Etop*, participant 14, too, did not know many of the candidates in the election and their political agendas.

In addition, the conversations that the papers previously generated between voters and candidates through the *People's Manifesto* missed from the 2021 elections. This means, as already indicated by the voting decisions of participants 19 and 21, voters didn't have a clear idea or no idea at all about what the candidates stood for.

Holding leaders accountable

The findings show that the local language papers ran the campaign dubbed *People's Manifesto* ahead of every general election. Under this campaign, the papers analyzed the performance of the incumbents and served as platforms for the voters to identify the pressing issues they wished the next crop of leaders to tackle.

By so doing, the papers empowered the electorate to set the agenda for politicians and created a platform for the voters and candidates to discuss and prioritize issues across their communities.

Through this campaign, the newspapers held leaders to account and empowered readers to do the same, which is a key element of democracy. The findings indicated that readers kept copies of the newspapers for years and produced them to challenge leaders over unfulfilled pledges. In 2019, for example, according to the findings, one of the readers showed up with the first issue of the *Orumuri* at the newspaper's 30th anniversary.

This demonstrates the value readers attached to the local newspapers and how the papers empowered them to demand accountability from leaders, thus nurturing democracy. In the absence of the People's Manifesto, voters were denied the right to engage with leaders and facilitate issue-based campaigns to inform their voting.

The papers also promoted accountability through publication of questions from readers to Members of Parliament in which they demanded to know the status of the manifestoes' implementation. The responses from Members of Parliament would be published in the week that followed publication of questions.

By so doing, the papers empowered readers to hold politicians accountable on service delivery. Without the papers, the voters lacked a platform to engage with leaders to shape their voting decisions. The findings also demonstrate that Inspector General of Government and Uganda Human Rights Commission investigated scandals that were exposed by the local language newspapers.

This is an example of how the newspapers set the agenda for the government institutions and contributed to promoting accountability and good governance – which are essential for democracy.

This finding is backed by an earlier study by Tettey (2012), who argued in the literature review that, newspapers in Africa have injected a certain level of accountability and transparency across governments and the media's exposure of corruption triggers investigations by state agencies. Besides publishing candidates' manifestos and stories, as participant 13, a former *Etop* editor observed, the paper focused on voter education during electioneering periods to increase voter turn up and offered voters a platform to express their opinions through commentaries and news articles.

Through this initiative, the papers, as pointed out in another survey by Akoh and Ahiabenu II (2012), played a significant role in facilitating voter participation in elections hence contributing to building democracy. This kind of reporting, as Akoh and Ahiabenu II (2012) observe, provides the electorate with information to make informed decisions – which is a crucial ingredient for democracy. The absence of papers to provide voter education resulted in people voting candidates they didn't know or choosing not vote certain aspirants because they didn't know their political agendas.

The reportage on corruption in local governments by *Etop* made the paper unpopular among politicians and civil servants. "But they became careful about how they handled government business," participant 13, who edited the paper, said.

In addition, the paper's publication of monetary allocations from the national government to local governments, according to the findings, encouraged people to demand accountability from leaders and volunteered information to the paper about suspected corruption scandals.

This reporting armed voters with necessary information to demand accountability and better services. The issue of service delivery features prominently in the Ugandan political campaigns and informs the voting decisions. But due to the absence of the newspapers, service delivery did not play a major role in the election as some respondents voted candidates without knowledge of their agendas on service delivery.

News and information in local languages

The findings show that the news that was accessible in the local language newspapers is missing from the English dailies. The results also demonstrate that the local language papers were cheaper than the English dailies and served as tools for preserving cultures, including languages. For readers, the closure of the papers meant loss of permanent records of their community stories and events.

There are information gaps across the communities and this has implications on democracy since people cannot make informed decisions. This, as findings show, affected the elections as some people went to the polls without adequate information. As already indicated this impacted their voting.

In explaining the development of the US newspaper industry in the 1830s, Anderson et al (2016) highlight in the literature review the role played by the penny press that concentrated reportage on local issues that appealed to Americans. The other factor, according to the authors, was the existence of several languages spoken by immigrants in the United States such as German, Danish and Italian.

This, as the authors indicate made newspapers cheaper and accessible to many Americans. This, the authors say, triggered large scale production of newspapers. Just like in the US in the 1830s, the readership and interest in the three Ugandan local language newspapers had grown over the years due to their focus on local issues.

This allowed the newspapers to influence voters' decisions and shape democracy. It is no surprise, therefore, that the findings reflect the impact of the newspapers' loss on the 2021 elections. The accessibility of newspapers in local languages is especially important for the rural Ugandan communities that cannot access news through the national English dailies. This is buttressed by Kasoma (1995) who argues in the literature review that English newspapers in Africa are accessed by the rich in urban areas with means to buy a paper daily. As a result, the author argues that, it's the views and demands of the rich that get heard by government.

This argument is reinforced by Nyirubugara (2014) who argued that the mainstream English newspapers on the continent do not focus on community issues, leaving majority of Africans who live in rural areas without reliable information sources. As a consequence, the lack of information affects the decisions of the rural populace as the findings indicate.

For example, participant 10 said candidates introduced themselves to voters at campaign rallies through interpreters. This, she said, was not the case with previous elections because voters were exposed to candidates' profiles and manifestoes through *Orumuri* newspaper before campaigns.

The loss of educational materials previously distributed to schools through the newspapers, as the findings indicate, is a major source of concern across the three communities. This has implications on the general wellbeing of the society and democracy.

Pupils in Ugandan rural schools perform dismally in national exams due to lack of access to educational materials. Many drop out of school from poor performance, which is a blow to efforts to build literate and democratic societies.

News deserts

The journalists that previously reported for the three vernacular language newspapers were interviewed to establish how they covered the 2021 general elections without the papers. The findings show that the issues which would have influenced the quality and outcome of the elections were not covered due to the absence of the papers.

As a result, some voters, as findings show, went to the polls without sufficient information on the candidates and their manifestoes.

The findings also indicate that local government campaigns and elections that formally featured in the defunct papers were not covered as the existing national media platforms focused on national issues. Some reporters who formally worked with the local language newspapers now write for national media platforms, and have refocused their reportage from local to national.

As participant 8, a journalist said, without the papers that ran the *People's Manifesto* to shape voting decisions, voters' choices were based on half-baked information.

This was confirmed by participant 21, who said she voted the candidates whose manifestoes she did not know because *Rupiny* which formally provided voters with candidates' profiles and agendas had closed. The findings show the radios which would have probably filled the vacuum left by the papers, previously relied on the same newspapers for a wide range of information on elections, including candidates' profiles and manifestoes.

More so, the coverage of the elections by a particular radio station was restricted to a district where it was located. This denied voters the newspaper-style regional wide perspectives around the electoral process. The radios, as findings show, focused on event-based stories around the election. Even the event-based stories were not explored deeply by radios because they allocated limited airtime to elections and focused on entertainment programmes sponsored by the advertisers who heavily influence content.

Without newspapers, the readers lacked detailed analysis of candidates' manifestoes and performance of incumbents which would have shaped the outcome of the election.

Internet and social media

I asked the fourteen newspaper readers whether they would be able to access local language news online. One out of 21 participants did not own a smart phone. By the time of the study, Ugandans could not access Over the Top services like video and audio calls on social media apps unless they had paid Over the Top Tax (OTT). This is nearly £1.50 per month.

Seven participants with smart phones, including three journalists, used the virtual private network to access the apps and could not receive WhatsApp and Facebook audio and video calls because they had not paid the tax. They said they didn't have money to pay the tax. The findings show that internet is still out of reach for many people in rural Uganda.

In addition, the findings indicate that there are smart phone owners who cannot be consistently online due to inability to pay for internet data and therefore cannot use phones to consume news online. The findings also show that the regulatory obstacles created by the government in form of taxes and internet blockades as well as expensive data discourage consumption of online news.

Furthermore, the low levels of digital literacy and incomes in rural areas keep many people locked out of the cyberspace. The findings show that there are families with only one smart phone and villages with a handful of these gadgets. Besides the poor communication infrastructure as a hindrance to adoption of digital technology, the findings show that the absence of electricity supply discouraged acquisition of smart phones.

The findings expand the existing literature by authors who have argued, as demonstrated in the literature review, that internet is accessible to Africans in urban areas but inaccessible to many people in rural areas due to poor communication, lack of energy infrastructure and low incomes (Birba and Diagne, 2012; Wakunuma-Zojer and Litho, 2009; Thierry et al, 2015; Lishan, 1996; de Beer, 2001; Paterson, 2013).

This explains why the three newspapers, which were shutdown as they could no longer be printed due to high operational costs, did not even go online. There were active Facebook pages for the same newspapers and the electronic versions of the content would be uploaded to their websites, but the papers were consumed offline. This is because majority of the readers do not have access to internet and digital tools like smart phones and computers.

But de Beer (2001) expressed optimism, as pointed out in the literature review, that smart phone explosion would narrow the digital divide between the urban and rural Africa. The author called for further research into how this would be achieved. This research has responded to this call and its findings show that the digital divide remains wide.

Without the newspapers, only readers with internet access in urban areas received the elections related information that circulated through phones. As a consequence, readers in rural areas who didn't have smart phones and internet access were cut off from the flow of political information, which impacted their voting decisions and the quality of the elections.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The loss of local newspapers hurts democracy and erodes a sense of community as information flow is curtailed (Abernathy, 2018). It is even worse when the loss of local news arises from the collapse of community newspapers accessible in indigenous languages.

Most of the research that has been done on the implication of loss of local news on elections and democracy focused on the US. This study has generated new information on the impact of loss of vernacular publications on elections and democracy from Uganda and contributed to filling the gap that exist in the literature. Furthermore, the existing literature focuses on the loss of English language newspapers. This study has enriched the literature with a focus on local language newspapers.

While readers of the lost English newspaper readers in places like the US can seamlessly migrate to online platforms to consume news, this study has involved people who have no online experience from a part of the world where internet infrastructure is poor, with low levels of digital technology adoption.

This is demonstrated by the fact that whereas journalists have set up digital platforms in the US regions that have lost newspapers albeit with financing model challenges, there are no online equivalents for the lost vernacular language newspapers in Uganda because the readers are not online.

The findings have demonstrated that the loss of local language newspapers affected the January 2021 general elections as candidates had to devise unusual means to get their messages across like printing and distributing manifestoes and using interpreters.

Some voters did not vote candidates at various levels because they did not know them. Others voted candidates whose political agendas they didn't know as the newspapers they previously depended on for candidates' profiles and manifestoes had closed.

This study has also demonstrated that newspapers were being deployed to empower people to demand for accountability from politicians and civil servants. As a consequence, the politicians and civil servants moved cautiously on issues involving public resources because they were being watched by the watchdogs – newspapers. This had implications on elections and democracy. Furthermore, the findings show that the content that was accessible through the lost newspapers is missing from the radios and the national English papers.

The study has found out that the loss of local language newspapers has dealt a grave blow to women and girl empowerment interventions and education in the rural areas as learners no longer receive the instructional materials that were distributed to schools through the papers.

Consequently, there are fears that education standards in the poorly-funded government primary and secondary schools will deteriorate further and the communities' languages and traditions might get lost without the newspapers. In the end, the quality of elections and democracy might deteriorate further.

In terms of future research, detailed studies could be conducted on the effect of loss of local language newspapers on democracy. More studies could be done on the implication of loss of instructional materials and local language literature on education and democracy.

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Appendices

Module Level Ethical Review Form

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

Information sheet for participants

Research for MA in International Communication programme

School of Media and Communication

University of Leeds, UK

This project is about the impact of the loss of local language newspapers on elections and democracy in Uganda.

Would you like to take part in this project?

Before you decide it is important that you understand why I am doing this project, and what your involvement in this project means. Please read this information sheet carefully. Please contact me if you would like me to explain something to you.

Thank you for thinking about taking part in my project!

Project summary

This project is about the three Ugandan local language newspapers that were closed in 2020 following the outbreak of coronavirus disease. The study seeks to understand the impact of the shutdown of *Etop*, *Orumuri* and *Rupiny* newspapers on elections and democracy in Uganda.

I am doing this project because I am a Masters research student at the University of Leeds.

Research means finding out about things and why they happen. I want to find out how the loss of the three newspapers which communities previously relied on for political information affected their voting decisions in the January 2021 elections and democracy.

In addition, I want to find out how journalists who reported for the three newspapers covered the elections and how the loss of the local language newspapers impacted the flow of information across the communities. I also want to establish how the absence of the three aforementioned community newspapers impacted the voting decisions of the readers.

Why do you want me to take part?

I need to speak to journalists who worked for the three newspapers to get information regarding how the loss of the papers affected their reporting of the elections for this study. In addition, I need to speak to the readers of the now defunct newspapers to understand how the loss of the papers impacted the way they received political information regarding the elections and how this affected their voting decisions. This information will only be used to complete the study. The participants in this study should be 18 years and above.

Do I have to take part?

This is voluntary – you do not have to take part. You must be over the age of 18 to take part.

If you would like to take part, I will ask you to sign a **consent form** that checks you understand about taking part. If we talk on the telephone or by video conferencing, I will send you the consent form before our meeting, or I will read it to you and I will ask you if you understand about taking part in my project. If you change your mind, you can stop taking part at any time.

You don't have to tell me why if you don't want to. Due to University of Leeds rules, I am unable to pay you to take part in my research, but I hope that you will find taking part interesting. Your views are important, and will contribute to our knowledge about this topic.

What will you ask me about?

I will ask you some questions to help me understand the implications of the loss of the aforementioned local language newspapers on elections and democracy in Uganda. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in **your** views about this topic.

Will I be recorded and what will you do with what you find out?

I will audio record the interview. Recording our talk helps me to remember what you have said! I will only use the recording to write up what we have said. No one else will listen to it. I will store the recording using a password on a computer at the university. Only I will be able to listen to it, because I have the password. The recording will be deleted at the end of my project. When I write about what you say, I will not reveal your name or any other personal details about you – your identity will be **anonymised**.

I will refer to you as 'Participant 1, 2, 3,...in my dissertation. Only my supervisor and examiners will read the dissertation. If at a later date I want to publish my research, or discuss my project with others in public, I will ask for your consent to use your data [what you told me about this research topic]. I will complete the dissertation research by September 2020.

Contact information:

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Thank you for your interest in my project!