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Rethinking Political Communication in Kenya's Hybrid
Media System**

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From Media Relations to Networked Contestation: Rethinking Political Communication in Kenya's Hybrid Media System

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Abstract

The transformation of political communication within hybrid media environments has fundamentally reconfigured the role and effectiveness of traditional media relations. This paper examines how political communication in Kenya has shifted from institutional, media-driven processes to decentralized and networked forms of contestation shaped by digital publics. Drawing on a qualitative desk-based review of scholarly literature and empirical developments across East Africa between 2022 and 2025, the study integrates hybrid media systems theory, framing theory, and symbolic interactionism to interrogate how political meaning is constructed, circulated, and contested. Using the Finance Bill 2024 protests in Kenya as a central case alongside comparative insights from Uganda's pre-2026 electoral digital discourse and Tanzania's 2025 general elections, the paper demonstrates that political communication is increasingly co-produced through interactions between state actors, media institutions, and citizens. The findings suggest that media relations no longer function as the dominant mechanism of agenda control; rather, it operates within a fragmented ecosystem characterized by rapid digital amplification, peer-to-peer influence, and meaning-making rooted in lived experience. This paper advances the concept of networked contestation as a theoretical contribution to political communication scholarship, particularly within African hybrid media contexts. It concludes that effective communication strategies must move beyond top-down approaches and instead engage networked publics as active co-producers of political meaning.

Keywords: *Networked contestation, Media relations, Hybrid media, Political communication, East Africa*

1.0 Introduction and Problem Statement

Political communication has long been understood as a structured process mediated by institutional actors, particularly legacy media organizations. Within this paradigm, media relations have served as a central mechanism through which political actors shape public narratives, manage legitimacy, and influence public opinion (McNair, 2017). It can be argued that this model assumed a relatively stable communication hierarchy in which media institutions occupied a central gatekeeping position.

However, the emergence of hybrid media systems has fundamentally disrupted this model. As digital platforms increasingly mediate political discourse, political actors' capacity to control

narratives through traditional media has diminished. Andrew Chadwick (2013) argues that contemporary political communication operates within hybrid media systems, where older media logics intersect with newer digital practices. In such systems, communicative power is dispersed across networks comprising journalists, political elites, activists, and citizens. Consequently, control over messaging becomes contingent, negotiated, and often contested.

In Kenya, these transformations have intensified over the past three years (2022–2025), with the rapid expansion of mobile internet, widespread social media use (particularly X, formerly Twitter; TikTok; and WhatsApp), and heightened youth political engagement, collectively reshaping the communicative landscape. Political discourse now unfolds across these platforms, where citizens actively participate in framing and reframing political issues. This shift is particularly evident in the protests against the Finance Bill 2024, which provides a critical empirical lens for examining these dynamics.

Government communication during the protests relied heavily on technocratic explanations emphasizing fiscal responsibility, economic reform, and long-term development, and this was disseminated through institutional media channels. However, these narratives were rapidly contested in digital spaces, where citizens reframed the bill in terms of economic precarity, survival, unemployment, and social injustice. Hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024, #RutoMustGo, and #OccupyParliament became vehicles for collective identity formation and mobilisation, transforming what began as opposition to specific tax measures into a broader generational challenge to governance (Ingutia, 2025; Kabiru, 2025). This divergence illustrates a broader shift from media relations to what this paper conceptualizes as networked contestation.

Despite these developments, much of the existing scholarship on political communication remains anchored in institutional models derived primarily from Western contexts. There is a notable gap in understanding how hybrid media systems operate within African contexts, particularly regarding citizen agency, interpretive practices rooted in lived experience, and regional variations across East Africa. This paper addresses this gap by examining how political communication in Kenya and comparatively in Uganda and Tanzania is being reconfigured through the interplay of media systems, digital publics, and lived realities. In doing so, it contributes to a contextually grounded analysis of political meaning-making in hybrid environments.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Media Relations in Political Communication

Media relations has traditionally been conceptualised as the strategic management of interactions between political actors and media institutions (McNair, 2017). Within this model, journalists function as gatekeepers who determine which political messages reach the public. Political actors, therefore, invest in media relations to influence coverage, shape agendas, and manage public perception.

However, this model assumes a relatively stable communication hierarchy in which media institutions occupy a central position. As Pfetsch and Esser (2004) note, political communication systems are structured around interactions between political actors, media, and citizens. Yet the rise of digital media complicates this triadic relationship by enabling direct communication between actors and audiences, thereby reducing the mediating role of traditional journalism. In African contexts, this disruption is amplified by historically uneven media landscapes, rapid digital adoption, and different cultural landscapes that impact meaning-making.

2.2 Hybrid Media Systems and Networked Publics

The concept of hybrid media systems, as advanced by Chadwick (2013), provides a critical framework for understanding contemporary political communication. Hybrid systems are characterized by the interaction of older media logics with newer digital practices, resulting in complex and fluid communication dynamics. Within such systems, power is not monopolised by institutional actors but distributed across networks that include journalists, politicians, activists, and citizens. Digital platforms enable the rapid dissemination of information and the amplification of alternative narratives. Consequently, political communication becomes a site of contestation rather than control.

In Kenya, scholars such as Nyabola (2018) have highlighted how digital platforms expand opportunities for political participation while simultaneously intensifying contestation. Similarly, Ogola (2015) describes social media as a heteroglossic discursive space in Kenya, where multiple narratives coexist and compete, challenging the dominance of institutional media. These insights align with Wasserman's (2020) broader observation that African media systems are inherently hybrid, characterised by the coexistence of formal and informal communication practices.

2.3 Framing and the Contestation of Meaning

Framing theory, as articulated by Entman (1993), emphasizes how issues are presented and interpreted within public discourse. Political actors seek to frame issues in ways that align with their objectives, while media institutions and citizens may construct competing frames. In hybrid media environments, framing processes are further decentralized to incorporate the diversity that comes with it. Digital platforms allow users to reinterpret and reframe political messages, often in ways that challenge official narratives from behind the keyboard, making contestation instant and fast. This dynamic is particularly evident in politically charged contexts, where competing frames reflect underlying social and economic tensions.

2.4 Symbolic Interactionism and Meaning-Making

As articulated by Blumer (1969), meaning is constructed through social interaction rather than passively received. In political communication, this suggests that citizens actively interpret messages through their lived experiences. Thus, even when political actors successfully disseminate messages through institutional channels, their meaning is not guaranteed; instead, it is subject to reinterpretation within social and digital contexts.

In the Kenyan context, this perspective is crucial for understanding why government communication often fails to resonate with citizens. Policy messages framed in technical or economic terms may be interpreted through the lens of everyday experiences, such as rising living costs or unemployment. This gap between intended and perceived meaning contributes to communication breakdown.

2.5 African Scholars' empirical contributions

African scholars have increasingly highlighted the transformative role of digital media. Nyabola (2018) argues that digital platforms in Kenya have expanded opportunities for political participation while intensifying contestation. Ogola (2015) demonstrates that social media functions as a heteroglossic space where multiple narratives coexist and compete. Wasserman (2020) emphasises that African media systems are inherently hybrid. These insights collectively underscore the need for contextually grounded analyses of political communication in East Africa.

Recent empirical work further supports this, including studies on youth-led digital activism during Kenya's 2024 protests (Ingutia, 2025; Kabiru, 2025; Twinomurinzi, 2024).

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative desk-based research design, drawing on secondary data sources to analyse political communication dynamics in Kenya and the broader East African region. Desk research is particularly appropriate for examining contemporary political developments, as it enables the integration of diverse data sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature, media reports, policy documents, and digital content.

The analysis focuses on developments within the past three years (2022–2025), a period marked by significant political and technological changes in East Africa. Key sources include peer-reviewed academic literature on political communication and hybrid media; media coverage of political events in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania; public statements and policy communications; and observations of digital discourse on platforms such as X and TikTok.

The Finance Bill 2024 protests serve as the primary case study, supplemented by comparative insights from Uganda's pre-2026 electoral digital discourse and Tanzania's 2025 general elections. Data was analysed thematically, with attention to patterns of communication, framing, citizen engagement, and meaning-making. Illustrative excerpts from digital platforms and scholarly analyses are used to capture how citizens interpret political messaging in real time. Ethical considerations for desk-based research were observed, including reliance on publicly available secondary sources.

4.0 Analysis and Results

4.1 Declining centrality of media relations

The findings indicate that traditional media relations no longer guarantee narrative control. While governments continue to engage institutional media, these channels are increasingly insufficient in shaping public discourse. For instance, during the Finance Bill 2024 debates, official communication emphasized fiscal responsibility and economic reform; however, these messages were quickly reframed within digital spaces, where alternative interpretations gained prominence (Osman, 2025).

4.2 Emergence of networked contestation

A defining feature of contemporary political communication is the emergence of networked contestation. Citizens actively participate in shaping discourse through digital platforms. In the Kenyan protests, Gen Z activists leveraged X, TikTok, and WhatsApp for leaderless mobilisation, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. Hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #RutoMustGo served as discursive anchors, fostering collective identity and expanding the movement beyond youth to "every Kenyan" (Ingutia, 2025; Kabiru, 2025).

Illustrative examples from digital discourse include reframings such as "They are explaining economics, but we are living survival" (echoing citizen sentiments documented in protest analyses (Ingutia, 2025)). In Uganda, similar dynamics appear in pre-2026 electoral discourse, where digital platforms facilitate contestation despite regulatory constraints (Ocen et al., 2026). In Tanzania, online spaces provided alternative channels for expression during the 2025 elections, even amid reported platform restrictions (Manyerere, 2025). These responses illustrate a redistribution of communicative power, with authority shifting from institutions to networked publics.

4.3 Framing Conflicts

The analysis reveals a divergence between official and citizen frames., In the Kenyan context, during the Finance Bill 2024 protests, government narratives emphasised policy rationality and economic necessity, whereas citizen narratives foregrounded lived realities such as the cost of living, unemployment, and generational disenfranchisement. Fiscal discourse was reframed as a question of survival and justice, significantly undermining the effectiveness of official communication (Twinomurizi, 2024; Arzani Ardebili, 2025; Ouma, 2025). Digital-native outlets like Kenyans.co.ke afforded slightly greater space to protesters and public voices compared to legacy-affiliated platforms, enabling more pluralistic framing (Osman, 2025).

4.4 Lived experience as interpretive anchor

Symbolic interactionism is particularly useful in explaining these dynamics. Citizens interpret political messages through the lens of lived experience. One protester’s account captured this: “Policies sound good on paper, but on the ground, things are different” , reflecting patterns in protest discourse (Ardebili, 2025). This illustrates how meaning is constructed through experience rather than imposed through communication.

4.5 Regional Patterns

Across East Africa, similar dynamics are evident. For instance, in Uganda, computational analyses of 2025 digital discourse reveal escalating polarisation around governance and economic issues, with networked publics challenging official narratives ahead of the 2026 elections (Ocen et al., 2026). In Tanzania, despite restrictions on social media during the 2025 elections, youth utilised platforms for alternative expression and human rights advocacy, highlighting the resilience of hybrid communication practices (Manyerere, 2025). These patterns suggest that hybrid media systems are reshaping political communication across the region, amplifying both participation and contestation.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Limits of Media Relations

These findings indicate that traditional media relations, while retaining some relevance, no longer constitute the dominant mechanism for narrative control within Kenya’s hybrid media system. It is evident from the analysis of the Finance Bill 2024 protests that government reliance on institutional channels to disseminate technocratic narratives of fiscal responsibility was systematically undermined by the rapid circulation of citizen-generated counter-frames on digital platforms (Ingutia, 2025; Kabiru, 2025). As Pfetsch and Esser (2004) observe in their comparative model of political communication systems, the triadic relationship among political actors, media institutions, and citizens has been profoundly destabilised by digital disruption, eroding the gatekeeping monopoly historically exercised by legacy outlets. In the Kenyan case, this erosion is further illuminated by sourcing practices in both legacy-affiliated and digital-native outlets, where institutional voices, for instance, government officials and security agencies, continued to predominate yet were increasingly juxtaposed with protester and public perspectives, revealing the contingent rather than absolute nature of elite influence (Osman, 2025).

This dynamic resonates strongly with Chadwick’s (2013) hybrid media systems theory, which posits that older and newer media logics interact in ways that render communicative power fluid and negotiated rather than hierarchically fixed. Consequently, media relations function less as a primary instrument of agenda-setting and more as one element within a broader, fragmented

ecology. In East African contexts characterised by rapid digital adoption and economic precarity, such limitations are particularly pronounced, as official messaging risks strategic obsolescence when confronted with peer-to-peer amplification (Twinomurinzi, 2024). These observations underscore a broader theoretical implication: in hybrid environments, the effectiveness of media relations is no longer guaranteed by institutional proximity but is perpetually contingent upon its capacity to compete within decentralised networks of meaning-making.

5.2 Networked contestation as the new normal

Furthermore, the emergence of networked contestation represents a defining reconfiguration of contemporary political communication in the region. It can be argued that this phenomenon extends beyond the mere distribution of communicative power to encompass its active, real-time negotiation through connective action. Building on Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) logic of connective action, the Finance Bill 2024 protests illustrate how digitally networked publics mobilize through personalized content sharing rather than formal institutional coordination facilitated by leaderless mobilisation via hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament, bypassing formal organisational structures while forging collective identity across dispersed networks (Ingutia, 2025; Kabiru, 2025). Similar patterns are seen in Uganda's pre-2026 electoral discourse, where computational analyses of 2025 social media data reveal escalating polarisation and fragmented yet participatory ecosystems despite regulatory constraints (Ocen et al., 2026). In Tanzania's 2025 general elections, youth similarly leveraged online spaces for alternative expression amid documented platform restrictions, demonstrating the resilience of networked practices even under constrained conditions (Manyerere, 2025).

These cases illustrate that, as Chadwick (2013) contends, hybrid media systems transform political communication into an arena of ongoing contestation rather than unidirectional transmission. It follows that networked contestation has become the prevailing norm in African hybrid contexts, amplifying citizen agency while simultaneously challenging institutional dominance. This shift not only aligns with Nyabola's (2018) emphasis on digital platforms as sites of intensified participation and contestation in Kenya but also highlights the need for political communication scholarship to move beyond Western-centric models that under-theorize the structural embeddedness of such contestation within realities of the global South (Wasserman, 2020).

5.3 The meaning-making gap

In addition, the study reveals a persistent meaning-making gap between technocratic government messaging and citizens' interpretive processes, which are firmly anchored in lived experience. Symbolic interactionism offers a particularly robust explanatory framework here, as Blumer (1969) asserts that meaning emerges through social interaction and is actively constructed rather than passively received. In the Kenyan protests, official frames emphasising policy rationality were systematically reinterpreted through the prism of economic precarity and generational disenfranchisement, resulting in reframings that foregrounded "survival" over fiscal reform (Ingutia, 2025; Twinomurinzi, 2024). This interpretive discourse, accelerated by peer-to-peer digital circulation, aligns with Entman's (1993) framing theory, wherein competing frames reflect and reproduce underlying social tensions.

Empirical evidence from digital discourse further demonstrates that such gaps are not incidental but structurally embedded within hybrid systems, where lived-experience frames proliferate more rapidly than institutional counter-narratives (Osman, 2025). Scholarship on symbolic action in social media reinforces this observation, indicating that users engage in ongoing interpretive

practices that reshape political meaning in ways that traditional media relations cannot fully anticipate or control (Penney, 2015). Bridging this divide, therefore, demands more than technical refinements in messaging; it necessitates a fundamental reconceptualization of audiences as active interpreters whose experiential realities must inform communicative strategies. Failure to do so risks not merely communicative inefficacy but broader erosion of governmental legitimacy.

5.4 Implications for political communication in Africa

These dynamics carry profound implications for both the theory and practice of political communication across African contexts. Hybrid media systems in East Africa generate qualitatively novel forms of power dispersion and contestation that cannot be adequately captured by models derived primarily from experiences in the global North (Chadwick, 2013; Wasserman, 2020). The Kenyan case, corroborated by parallel developments in Uganda and Tanzania, illustrates how such systems simultaneously democratise participation and complicate governance, thereby creating opportunities for enhanced civic engagement alongside risks of fragmentation, misinformation, and elite disconnection (Nyabola, 2018; Ocen et al., 2026; Manyerere, 2025).

In broader political communication discourse, these findings reinforce calls for contextually grounded scholarship that privileges African specificities, including uneven digital access, historical state-media entanglements, and the centrality of lived experience in meaning-making (Pfetsch & Esser, 2004). Ultimately, effective political communication in the region must redefine networked publics not as passive recipients but as co-producers of meaning, thereby fostering greater democratic resilience while mitigating the dangers of institutional detachment. This redefinition, moreover, holds potential to enrich hybrid media theory by foregrounding the structurally contested nature of communicative power in postcolonial democratic settings.

5.5 Theoretical contribution

This paper advances the concept of networked contestation as a theoretical refinement and extension of hybrid media systems theory, specifically calibrated to the political communication dynamics of East African contexts. While Chadwick (2013) postulates hybrid media systems as environments in which older institutional logics intersect with newer digital practices, resulting in fluid and contingent communicative power, much of the existing literature tends to treat contestation as a secondary feature rather than a structural condition. Networked contestation, by contrast, posits that hybrid media systems in postcolonial African democracies are inherently and continuously contested sites where political meaning is not merely distributed or negotiated but actively produced, challenged, and reconfigured through decentralised digital networks. It can be argued that this concept captures the distinctive interplay of rapid peer-to-peer amplification, lived-experience framing, and heteroglossic discourse that characterises contemporary East African political communication.

Networked contestation is operationalized here as the ongoing, digitally mediated process through which citizens, activists, and ordinary publics engage in collective meaning-making that directly contests elite-driven narratives, thereby redistributing communicative authority away from traditional gatekeepers. It builds upon and extends several established theoretical strands. First, it refines Chadwick's (2013) hybrid media framework by foregrounding contestation as the central dynamic rather than hybridity per se. In hybrid systems, power is not simply dispersed across networks of journalists, politicians, and citizens; it is perpetually renegotiated in real time through connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). During the Finance Bill 2024 protests, for example, Gen Z activists employed leaderless, personalised yet collectively resonant hashtags such

as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #RutoMustGo to transform individual grievances into shared frames of economic survival and generational injustice. This process bypassed institutional media relations entirely, illustrating how digital platforms enable what Mukhongo (2020) has termed “online political contestations,” virality-driven, humor-infused interventions that amplify alternative narratives and sustain mobilization beyond episodic events.

Second, networked contestation extends symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) into digital political communication by positioning lived experience as the primary interpretive anchor. Citizens do not passively receive technocratic frames from government or legacy media, rather they actively reinterpret them through the prism of everyday realities such as unemployment, rising living costs, and perceived elite detachment. In the Kenyan case, official discourse emphasising fiscal rationality was systematically reframed as disconnected from “survival,” a process accelerated by peer-to-peer circulation on X, TikTok, and WhatsApp (Ingutia, 2025; Kabiru, 2025). This interpretation aligns with Entman’s (1993) framing theory while grounding it in African hybrid realities, where digital publics function as heteroglossic spaces (Ogola, 2015) that accommodate multiple, competing voices and challenge the dominance of institutional meaning-making.

Third, the concept provides a contextually grounded framework for understanding African hybrid media systems, addressing a persistent gap in scholarship dominated by perspectives from the global North (Wasserman, 2020; Nyabola, 2018). In East Africa, where mobile internet penetration has outpaced regulatory capacity, and youth constitute a demographic majority, networked contestation manifests as both emancipatory and destabilizing. Comparative evidence from Uganda’s pre-2026 electoral discourse and Tanzania’s 2025 elections reveals parallel patterns in which digital platforms facilitate contestation despite varying degrees of state regulation, underscoring the resilience of networked publics even amid constraints such as regulatory pushback and uneven digital access (Ocen et al., 2026; Manyerere, 2025). In doing so, networked contestation offers a productive avenue for future comparative research across the Global South, where similar dynamics of digital empowerment and institutional contestation are increasingly evident.

6.0 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that political communication in Kenya and by extension across East Africa has undergone a profound shift from a model centered on media relations to one characterised by networked contestation. In hybrid media systems, as theorized by Chadwick (2013), meaning is no longer transmitted unidirectionally but co-produced through dynamic interactions among political actors, media institutions, and digitally empowered citizens. The Finance Bill 2024 protests exemplify the limitations of traditional strategies, wherein citizen reframings rooted in lived experience rapidly undermined official narratives and mobilised sustained contestation (Ingutia, 2025; Kabiru, 2025). Comparable patterns in Uganda’s evolving pre-2026 electoral discourse and Tanzania’s constrained yet resilient online spaces during the 2025 elections further affirm the regional salience of these transformations.

By advancing networked contestation as a refinement of hybrid media theory, one that foregrounds active negotiation of power through connective action, interpretive practices anchored in lived experience, and heteroglossic digital publics, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of political communication in African contexts (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Mukhongo, 2020). Ultimately, the viability of communication strategies in such environments

hinges on their capacity to engage the complexities of participatory, contested, and dynamic landscapes. Rather than seeking to restore institutional control, political actors must embrace networked publics as co-producers of meaning, thereby enhancing both legitimacy and responsiveness in an era of hybrid media. Future scholarship should continue to interrogate these processes comparatively, ensuring that theoretical advancements remain firmly grounded in the lived realities of African democratic practice.

7.0 Recommendations

It is recommended that political actors and communication practitioners in East Africa adopt strategies that transcend conventional media relations in favour of adaptive, participatory approaches aligned to networked publics. Specifically, this entails investing in real-time digital listening mechanisms to monitor and engage with citizen frames, as well as co-creating messaging that integrates lived-experience perspectives rather than imposing technocratic narratives (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Ingutia, 2025). In addition, policymakers should prioritise regulatory frameworks that safeguard digital expression while addressing misinformation, striking a balance that upholds democratic participation without compromising platform accountability. Such measures, if implemented with transparency and stakeholder inclusion, hold the potential to foster more responsive and legitimate political communication ecosystems.

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