

## **X Space and the Revolution of Digital News Content: The Case of Generation-Z Protest Narratives in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

*The power of digital media in Kenya has been demonstrated in the active social engagement and production of news discourse during the recent Generation-Z (Gen-Z) political activism on X Space. The discourse confirms a growing mass participation in news discourse on digital media taking precedence over legacy media. In the age of disruptive technologies, and the production of social-political discourses, an active, critical and content-producing mass is quickly surpassing traditionally assumed passive audience. In Kenya, amid a digital media frenzy over the Gen-Z protests, citizen journalism overrides legacy journalism, and in some cases, raw footage captured at points of witness is uploaded online without as much censorship. The paper applied qualitative in-depth interviews of eight journalists to assess the Gen-Z political activism and production of discourses on X Space. Theories of disruptive technologies were juxtaposed against the agenda-setting theory to identify the positive effects of digital narratives, including facilitating activism, active youth engagement in news discourse and social change. The study found out that a new form of youth activism has emerged, with the youth fruitfully engaging in X Space discourses, which culminate in actual street protests; Digital storytelling represents a powerful fusion of technology and social consciousness, where the young people project their voices of concern; Citizen journalism has fundamentally altered the dynamics of traditional journalism, reshaping the way news is gathered, reported, and consumed; and that during the protests, mainstream media played catch-up as it struggled to keep up with the many discourses emerging from X Spaces. The study recommends that traditional media aim to fully align with the opportunities presented in disruptive innovative developments; and that the Kenyan media grab the opportunity to re-evaluate their approach to gathering and disseminating news in the modern age for sustainable business and to maintain their important agenda-setting and gatekeeping roles.*

**Key Words:** *Disruptive Technologies, Digital Media, X Space, Gen-Z Protest, Youth Activism and Digital Stories*

### **1.0 Introduction**

Digital technologies have transformed the production and distribution of news globally. The traditional journalism style of producing news and gatekeeping has undergone significant changes with the advent of disruptive technologies. Key features of conventional media include a physical

format, limited interactivity, scheduled distribution, one-way communication, production costs, localized reach and the presence of gatekeepers. However, disruptive technologies have ushered in powerful story-telling digital platforms that include the internet, mobile devices, social media, virtual reality, augmented reality, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, among others. Because these platforms enable the creation of user-generated content, and the ability to share the content and interact with fellow users, they have largely displaced the conventional position of journalism as the single, trusted disseminator of news. The audience is no longer a passive recipient of news in the fashion of the magic bullet theory.

Recent events in Kenya have necessitated this study to assess how political discourse is currently being produced online. On June 12, 2024, young people dubbed Gen-Zs boldly took to the streets with a simultaneous online protest using #RejectFinanceBill2024 to demand the removal of a bill they deemed punitive and suffocating. These young people would converge on surging X Spaces (which had hitherto witnessed very few numbers), plan the protest and show up in the streets. The Communications Authority of Kenya (2024) reported that social media uptake surged during the protests resulting in Facebook usage crossing the 50% mark for the first time in Kenya's history, and Twitter users increasing by 2.1%. This information is significant because it brings to question the role of mainstream media since the surge in social media uptake meant the users were seeking information and updates.

The protests unfortunately turned deadly when 39 protestors were killed, particularly on June 25<sup>th</sup> (when the youth invaded parliament and set a section of it on fire). Kenya witnessed a surge in citizen-produced digital stories with gory, disturbing images shared on X (formerly Twitter) and other platforms. For instance, one photo that is widely shared on X is of four youths with a raised Kenyan flag standing in a line and at their feet is one of the protestors lying dead, shot by the police. Other images that were livestreamed by the youth is a body of a young man lying outside parliament, his brains splattered.

X is a free microblog, a social networking site where users create tweets (short posts) which can contain text, videos, photos or links (Hetler, n.d.). It is an algorithm-driven resource that records trending events at a given moment. Dixon (2024), on Statistica, reveals that in 2024, over five billion people were on social media globally with the figure expected to increase to over six billion in 2028. X reported 206 million monetizable daily users globally in 2021, with the US recording 106.23 million of these (Dixon, 2024). According to Data Reportal (2024), Kenya had 22.71 million internet users at the beginning of 2024, with 13.05 million of these being on social media. Degenhard (2024) reveals that 3.21 million people use X in Kenya, with the number expected to rise to 6.78 million users by 2028.

Concerning usage, Statistica Research Department (2024) cites a global survey whose results showed that 53% of X users pay attention to mainstream news outlets on the platform. These results imply that mainstream media has not lost its place as trustworthy news disseminators. Additionally, 45% were drawn to celebrities and influencers while 43% focused on politicians and political activists on X. This last segment represents a significant audience given the recent political protests in Kenya. Additionally, X has become increasingly relevant in local and

international political discourses. Governments, organizations, institutions and individuals hold X accounts, according to Statistica Research Department (2024), which also reports that world leaders and foreign ministries use it to promote policies and interact with citizens. For example, former President Donald Trump profoundly used X before his account was suspended for inappropriate use.

Besides use by prominent people and institutions, X has increasingly become a platform for social and political protest. For instance, activist Alicia Garza created a Facebook post in 2016 with the words, “Black Lives Matter” after George Zimmerman was acquitted following Trayvon Martin’s shooting (Bestvater, et al., 2023). This incident marked the birth of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter which quickly spread to Twitter, and has consistently been used as a form of social protest, garnering 44 million tweets from 2013-2023. X’s power and ability to influence and alter political narratives has been witnessed in actual uprisings, such as the Arab Spring uprising, as demonstrated by Alhindi et al (2012) who postulated that social media notably enabled communication among the people, which would not have been possible without the use of modern technology. This view finds support in Domingues (2013) who elucidated on Twitter’s importance in informing the international community of the atrocities the Egyptians had endured under Mubarak’s regime by posting videos and pictures of Tahrir Square.

Currently, X Spaces (hosted on X) are becoming popular live fora for hosting discourses, whether social, economic, political, religious, etc. According to X Space Centre (2024), Spaces conduct live audio conversations where anyone who is logged online with iOS and Android can join, listen, and speak. In fact, journalists now use X Spaces to hold live conversations and connect with their audience in a new way. Anyone on X for iOS and Android can start a Space, which is public. The creator is automatically the host and can make certain people co-hosts (X Space Centre, 2024). Once created, these Spaces automatically appear at the top of all users’ home timelines, with each Space having a sharable link. It is these Spaces that Kenya’s Gen-Zs effectively utilized to mobilize and actualize street protests against the 2024 Finance Bill.

Ndungu (2024) reports that X Spaces served as a powerful platform for expressing strong uncontainable emotions following disturbing abductions of protestors. An X user known as @osama\_otero started a Space called *Good Morning Kenya: Where is crazy Nairobian*; and this Space lasted seven hours, attracting an unprecedented 1.2 million listeners. The current study is relevant given that the phenomena under study is a recent event and also considering the paucity of studies that interrogate the place of journalism and citizen-produced digital stories, particularly on X Spaces in Kenya. This study, therefore, aimed to assess the Gen-Z political activism and production of discourses on X Space.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **X and Conventional Media (Journalism)**

X has transformed how news is created, processed and shared among users. Mainstream media has not been left behind since individual media outlets are on social media, with some facilitating public opinion. For instance, Sekar (2020) observes that mainstream media, believed to be more authentic and credible, has a massive presence on Twitter, with people consuming and circulating its content. Through a content analysis of the tweets of 13 mainstream media organizations, the author notes that a few mainstream media organizations methodically advocate selective amplifications, and in the process, facilitate public opinion through Twitter narratives. These organizations generate a few daily feeds as news updates and breaking news but habitually circulate the same feed a number of times (Sekar, 2020). On his part, Kamps (2019) reports that 25% of verified Twitter accounts belong to journalists and news media accounts.

New ecological conditions concerning news content circulation in a contemporary digital society is a factor to consider. Waisbord (2019), for example, notes that the pyramidal model of news that has been in existence since the start of industrial journalism is crumbling due to digital journalism. Consequently, these developments have expanded the essential journalism elements of who, what, where, when, why, and how news are reported. Meanwhile, Ahmed (2010) observes that television in India no longer monopolizes the alleviation or aggravation of a crisis because the advent of social media has changed that. The author concludes that Twitter emerged as an undisputable game changer when it unified the nation (despite the socio-cultural divide) to protest sexual gender-based violence with the hashtag #DelhiGangrape. Twitter helped to democratize Indian media functionalities by providing ordinary people a platform to share detailed accounts (both text and images) of the ongoing protest as well as evidence of government brutality following nationwide protests. Syamili (2016) shows that Twitter was effective in assessing people's sentiments in a highly charged Twitter campaign (#metoo) with various accompanying hashtags that spoke about women empowerment, feminism, sexuality, rehabilitation, abuse, harassment and justice.

According to Mathews (2013), social media has significantly transformed newsrooms in the way journalists gather news because a wide range of sources and material is now available. The author reported an average of 500m daily tweets globally. He noted that 40% of Twitter users find the platform a "curated news feed of updates that reflect their passions" (Mathews, 2013). Baftiu and Dodds' (2023) study found that Kosovo political journalists and editors find Twitter to be a platform that allows them to exhibit their identities as professionals and as individuals. These media professionals now take on roles outside the traditional scope of journalism, journalistic principles and standards notwithstanding.

Media practitioners can play the role of good citizens where they express opinions on political issues and as activists where they advocate for personally meaningful causes. However, these journalists recognize their roles as mordant critics of political figures. Swassy, as cited by Chamberlain (2015), opines that Twitter's major impact on news coverage concerns the gatekeeping function. The decision to publish news now lies in the hands of the user. Besides, Twitter provides newspapers with immediacy, where news outlets first tweet about the event, post it online, and then print it. Journalists on Twitter now have a chance to expand their traditional jobs. Swassy provides one example of an Atlanta editor whose hobby was figure skating and when

she tweeted about the sport, she gained 500 new followers for the Journal-Constitution, something the paper's sports section had ignored.

## **Background of Gen-Z Protests**

18<sup>th</sup> June 2024 marked a significant event in Kenya because for the first time in the country's history, youth with no tribal or other affiliation (dubbed Gen-Zs) protested against the proposed 2024 Finance Bill in the streets. What followed on June 25 was the storming of parliament, where a section of it was set on fire. It was not only a protest against the Finance Bill 2024, but against the Presidency and government of President William Ruto who came to power in 2022. The perception was that Kenya's economy was on a free fall and people were suffering financially yet taxes were dangerously on the rise. Most Kenyans felt that this bill was punitive as it levied taxes on vital products like bread, menstrual health products, mobile money transfers and motor vehicle tax (Makhulo, 2024). The protests also brought with them public anger and frustration against the leadership, largely perceived as corrupt (Makhulo, 2024).

What made this protest significant was the youth's effective use of technology; the use of social media like X (particularly X Spaces) and Telegram, as well as walkie-talkies on downloadable apps. Makhulo (2024) reports that this specific protest was unique in form and organization because it leveraged on digital organizing. The young people converged on different Spaces in their hundreds and thousands to educate one other and share information before converging into the streets to livestream their protests and articulate their demands. The #RejectFinanceBill2024 protest aimed to push for the government to drop the bill, and once the bill was dropped, the young people now began pushing for President Ruto's resignation with #RutoMustGo. The Resistance Movement (2024) noted that the government responded quickly (which was unprecedented) mainly because these protests were unlike any other; there was no usual opposition leader who could be bought to call off the protests and the protests were organic, with explicitly multiethnic members sold to a cause.

## **Disruptive Technologies**

The disruptive technologies that we currently possess and continue to develop have completely changed the landscape of mainstream media. This is because, as Omenugha (2019) states, people and technology have a mutually beneficial relationship, and as a result, the influence changes as technology advances. This shift in the behaviour of audiences has created new opportunities for content creators and consumers by making room for disruptive technologies to create new kinds of media, but it has also created issues for the mass media's existing financial structures. These difficulties include fake news, information overload, and data privacy issues. The media landscape has changed because of disruptive technologies, presenting both new opportunities and difficulties for media companies and content producers. The technologies have influenced audience demographics and spawned new media genres. Disruptive technologies have prompted the creation of new media, altered viewer behaviour, and put conventional business structures to the

test. Social media is the first disruptive technology. It includes business-oriented sites like LinkedIn as well as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram which have completely transformed the way consumers and audiences receive and exchange information (Rad, 2017). Audiences and citizens alike now realize their ability to produce information, which can alter the speed at which news travels. More content goes viral, and news spreads quickly thanks to user-generated content. With citizen journalism growing in popularity for breaking news and live stories, the dynamics of journalism have also evolved. This growth places the production of social stories central to digital spaces. According to Gehrke and William (2014), this is because it has greatly accelerated, simplified, and improved communication.

### **Youth Activism and Digital Stories**

Youth activism can be referred to as the active involvement of young people in socio-political aspects. In Kenya, the vibrancy of youth is not a new thing and as early as post-independence 1960s, University students were highly engaged in advocating for their social welfare, and matters ranging from the state of education and facilities (Macharia, 2015). Over time, in the years that followed, students began to engage systematically in political action, including protests and violent confrontations (Deutschmann, 2023). These earlier movements produced some of the most prolific political leaders in the country including, Raila Odinga, James Orengo, Peter Nyongo, and currently Babu Owino, who were central to the constructive political agitations in their days in universities. These faces have been replaced with a faceless, amorphous mass of youth behind keyboards and X Spaces articulating issues of concern and producing engaging digital stories. By fusing traditional narratives with modern themes like social justice, politics, and youth empowerment, Kenyan storytellers use digital platforms to make stories that reflect their varied experiences. With the help of these platforms, storytellers may reach a wider audience both domestic and abroad with everything from short films and web series to social media campaigns and podcasts. Additionally, digital storytelling gives underrepresented voices a platform, creating a more diverse narrative environment that dispels preconceptions and highlights distinctive viewpoints.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper utilizes the underpinnings within the disruptive innovation theory, where disruptive innovation is realized in the space of technological advancement applied in fostering change. In this case, communicative dynamics propel the production and dissemination of information on digital spaces. This theory is juxtaposed against the agenda setting theory which emphasizes on the power of the media in determining the public agenda, through the dissemination of salient news using traditional media channels. The former essentially identifies the positive effects of digital narratives, including facilitating activism, active youth engagement in news discourse and social change. The latter is hinged on traditional news production processes.

### **Disruptive Innovation Theory**

In his highly cited book, "The Innovator's Dilemma," released in 1997, American management consultant Clayton Christensen established and popularized the disruptive innovation theory.

According to the hypothesis, disruptive innovations occur when established or incumbent businesses are so focused on meeting the demands of the most lucrative market segments that they neglect the needs of customers in other market categories (Rad, 2017). This makes room for new businesses to enter the underserved market sector and take advantage of the potential it presents. When established businesses with a larger market share and a larger client base are successfully challenged by smaller organizations or businesses with fewer resources, disruption results. This hypothesis states that one type of innovation frequently leads to the demise of established companies (Rad, 2017). The main reason for this is that most of these established companies prioritize market niches with high returns over those with poor margins, which they overlook. To target the market segments that were overlooked and posed a threat to the established businesses, the new organizations adopt an inventive business plan. The new companies can use disruptive innovations to adopt technology that enable them to produce more affordable items, which will expand their market reach. Thus, disruptive technology is a business model that sets the impetus for innovative creativity, adapting both technological and communicative models. Using this lens, we argue that production of media content enhanced through disruptive technologies alters existing modes of production, consumption, and the operation of the media industry. In the media context, disruptive technology overrules the assumptions held by traditional media, also known as legacy media. Digital narratives as those on X Space then take precedence in the age of disruptive technologies, more so, in this study, those that enhanced the spread of politically nuanced information among the youth. The Gen-Z were previously regarded as uninterested and passive consumers of political news. Most citizen content producers have self-taught in Mobile Journalism (MoJo) and may not adhere to set journalistic and ethical principles. In the space of digital technology, an active, critical, and content-producing mass has quickly overridden the initially assumed passive audience. Omenugha (2019) has positioned that as disruptive technology sweeps away the systems or habits, it replaces them because it has attributes that are recognizably superior. The notion of sweeping away or replacing technology means a rebirth of new ideas and revamping of old ones, with the aim of bringing systemic changes that ought to make technology work for humans.

### **Juxtaposition with Agenda Setting Theory**

Traditional news media production was pegged on the agenda setting theory that was advanced among earlier theorists (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, McCombs, 2004). It holds that using a selection criterion, the media focuses on issues it considers important and salient to set its agenda. Through constant production and dissemination of information on these issues, they form the agenda within the public sphere. As a result, it highlights the salience component—which maintains that the public considers what the media considers significant. The agenda-setting idea is popular in vertical or traditional media, but it is contested in horizontal or digital media, as advanced in arguments made by Berger and Freeman (2011). The authors consider how much of the agenda-setting hypothesis was influenced by Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, which made the claim that "the news media construct our view of the world" (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009:147). Although the Agenda Setting and Disruption of Innovation theories relate to various fields and procedures of media use, production and dissemination, they both provide a crucial framework for comprehending how information and invention affect media channels (digital and traditional) in the formation of public perceptions. The two theories are contrasted and

compared on different levels. For instance, the agenda setting theory has maintained that the media shapes public opinion. It implies that “while the media does not dictate what individuals should think; it does dictate what they should think about.” In selecting salient issues through the editorial process, the media has already chosen the dimension through which public discourse will be shaped. This traditional position has been contested for framing audiences as passive, and easily swayed by the media discourse. This position is contested as demonstrated in this paper by the ability of the audience to determine the kind of issues they want to amplify. In earlier agenda setting projections, the issues that the public considers essential were determined by the media through prominence, framing, and repetition. This is especially pertinent to social and political issues. The agenda setting theory is ingrained in aspects of news value- to enhance the selection- where journalistic techniques and organizational culture influence the choice of topics. As a result, facts are reported without any historical, social, political, economic, or cultural context. In essence, meanings remain unexplained, allowing for various context interpretations. The traditional dominant media approaches may be sustained for a long period, but disruptive innovation builds momentum over time, often unnoticed at first, until it reaches a tipping point.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The study used a qualitative methodology. We were interested in interpreting certain practices to make sense of our world (Creswell, 2013). In taking this qualitative route, we were informed by the social constructivist paradigmatic tradition since it allowed us to immerse ourselves in the conversations with participants as they reflected on their experiences. A reflection on experiences during the Gen-Z protests and how news was shared, allowed the researchers to tease out meaningful perspectives about digital media with a specific focus on news making, news gathering, and the verification of news.

In-depth interviews were used to explore participants' perceptions in response to the study's research methods. In this way, we explored in depth the role of the X Space in shaping conversations and positioning digital media as the shift from traditional media models. To this end, through purposive and snowball sampling, we interviewed 8 informants, who are seasoned journalists from mainstream media.

The study also employed Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The unit of analysis refers to the basic unit of text to be classified during content analysis. When using theme as the coding unit, you are primarily looking for the expressions of an idea (Minichiello et al., 1990). Thus, in this study a code was assigned to a text chunk of any size, if that chunk represented a single theme or issue of relevant to the study's objective.

### **4.0 Findings & Discussion**



The current study sought to assess the Gen-Z political activism and production of discourses on X Space. Four themes were identified: Journalists' perspectives on Gen-Z's political activism and X Space discourse production; Youth activism and digital storytelling; Journalism dynamics vs citizen journalism and breaking news/live stories; and mainstream media's performance vs Gen-Zs agenda setting. To represent the informants' views, we have referred to them as Key Informant (KI), thus, they are KI-1, KI-2, KI-3, KI-4, KI-5, KI-6, KI-7 and KI-8. For QCA, the results are presented verbatim (some in Sheng and Kiswahili, but we have provided English translations):

### **Journalists' Perspectives- Political Activism and X Space Discourse Production**

The informants noted the superior mobilization tactics of Gen-Zs who successfully mobilized without relying on legacy media as noted below:

*“Through social media platforms, they were able to maintain their anonymity and release crucial information that helped them mobilise. There was also the aspect of quick mobilisation. They had a control of their narrative as they created the events, performed and became their own reporters” (KI-2).*

*“It was revolutionary, prompt and well-coordinated. The discourses on X Spaces served as a rapid mobilization platform that was easily coded and accessible. Even so, Gen-Z's next moves were undetectable, and their plans sailed through under the radar of government's security organs” (KI-4).*

The informants elucidated on the power of disruptive technologies and the limitations of traditional media in shaping public narratives, a view held by Ahmed (2010) who notes the less power mainstream media has in monopolizing narratives. The informants posited that Gen-Z has harnessed these technologies to create decentralized, dynamic and immediate forms of political engagement, often outpacing mainstream media in setting the agenda on critical issues.

*“It is a game changer especially on how politics has been viewed especially by countries in the global south. It uniquely brings out their voice in the political agenda and it has greatly helped shape the direction of political conversation to be more inclusive especially of the youth” (KI-3).*

Informant KI-1 noted that the youth are well-informed and are hugely versed in technological advancement and trends, something mainstream media is struggling with and playing catch-up in the process. Playing catch-up means mainstream media may not meet the demands of the demands of the most lucrative market segments as espoused in Rad's (2017) depiction of the disruptive innovation theory. However, Informant KI-1 opined that the advanced knowledge in the hands of the young people is worrying and should be seriously monitored because it can be easily abused. The informant noted that unlike mainstream media whose main operatives are governed by relevant bodies and media ethics, social media use is still largely unregulated.

The journalists appreciated that the X Space enjoys a one-on-one interaction with the citizens and this has increased the speed of information dissemination. While the mainstream media has specified time for news dissemination, X Spaces can be scheduled any time causing the campaigns which included the use of hashtags and posters to spread faster.

Informant KI-5 believes that disruptive technologies provide Gen-Z with heretofore unimaginable power to originate, influence and magnify political discourse beyond the confines of traditional mainstream media. Gen-Z's political participation via X Spaces demonstrates a shift in the distribution of political power and influence in the digital age. These new discourse forms, which frequently prioritize speed, inclusivity and a broader range of perspectives over the hierarchical structures of mainstream channels, necessitate that traditional media adapt to coexist. In fact, Omenugha (2019) speaks to this finding when he asserts that disruptive technology sweeps away the systems or habits, replacing them because it has attributes that are recognizably superior.

Informant KI-4's opines that Gen-Z protests have given the Kenyan media an opportunity to reevaluate its approach to news in the modern age. Unlike older generations, Gen-Z tends to bypass traditional media and create and consume content that aligns with their own beliefs, meaning they are increasingly setting their own agenda as espoused by McCombs & Shaw (1972). This has led to a more diverse and decentralized conversation. Further, the development of AI and the internet of things has played a crucial role in advancing activism by enabling targeted messaging and mobilization. This technological advancement has empowered people to process large amounts of information, recognize patterns within it, and predict important outcomes like never before.

*“Platforms like X Spaces were crucial for in-depth and valuable conversations, providing a top-tier forum for sharing innovative ideas, organizing impactful protests and firmly amplifying voices. The swift responsiveness and unmatched availability of these platforms allowed them to effectively confront, mobilize and coordinate messages during the protests. It has opened an alternative channel for discourse that Kenyans were not really using” (KI-4).*

Meanwhile, KI-2 maintains that Gen-Z's political activism on X Spaces is changing how people discuss politics, making it quicker and easier to access and take part in political discourses which are now more driven by ordinary people. In essence, the young people are setting the pace and the agenda, as seen in the agenda setting theory. However, KI-2 cautions that mainstream media is still important for checking facts, giving background information and offering deeper insights in the changing environment.

*“This kind of digital activism represents a shift from mainstream media to digital media in terms of political engagement. In terms of accessibility and global connectivity, digital platforms like X Spaces are real time and provide feedback immediately unlike mainstream media” (KI-1).*

### **Journalism Dynamics, Citizen Journalism, and Breaking News/Live Stories**

All the five informants agreed that the rise of citizen journalism has fundamentally altered the dynamics of traditional journalism, reshaping the way news is gathered, reported, and consumed. This view finds support in Gehrke and William (2014) who opine that it has greatly accelerated, simplified, and improved communication. According to informants, this shift has introduced both opportunities and challenges for the journalism landscape. The journalists noted that journalism has had some tenets like objectivity, verification, truthfulness, among others. However, through the dynamism brought about by the new disruptive technologies and internet, these tenets have been shaken. There's less premium placed on the cannons of journalism. Today everybody is a journalist, and many do not verify information. Besides, fake news has replaced truthfulness, and objectivity has been lost because the citizen journalist doesn't know how to consider all the sides involved in a story. This finding is supported by Swassy, as cited by Chamberlain (2015) concerning the gatekeeping function of the media.

*“We have seen more people becoming authorities as it relates to dissemination of information. People are asking more questions; thus, more research is being done to get the facts. Therefore, I can say that journalism has evolved as people are not reliant on just one voice but more and more voices to verify authenticity of information” (KI-2).*

KI-3 supports KI-2's assertions on how research-oriented citizens have evolved. According to this informant, because citizen journalism has acted as a source of alarm to emerging issues where anyone and everyone can share content through the various platform, and where there is no limitation on how much content one can post, verification is key. More and more people are becoming more skeptical about everything posted online and will verify information.

KI-5 illuminates how citizen journalism is becoming popular in the digital era where people have access to smart phones and the internet, hence they obtain the news individually. The informant states that the information from the internet may be truthful; however, the mainstream media still scores as a truthful source of information, a view that agrees with Sekar (2020).

*“The rise of citizen journalism has altered the power dynamics in news production, making journalism more instantaneous, interactive, and collaborative. It has democratized news, allowing ordinary people to influence the public agenda, but it also brings challenges such as deception and the disintegration of traditional gatekeeping” (KI-2).*

According to all the informants, journalism dynamism has also evolved as evident in the explosion of citizen journalism in Kenya and Africa. Technology offers significant prospects for generating specialized content. With the integration of AI, anyone (both trained journalists and untrained citizens) can now create more intelligent content tailored to specific audiences, eliminating the need for providing general content to everyone. Indeed, Omenugha (2019) postulates that the shift in the behaviour of audiences has created new opportunities for content creators and consumers by making room for disruptive technologies to create new kinds of media. Informants believe that the disruption represents a major technological advancement for journalism, whether legacy or citizen. The democratization of journalism enables a variety of voices to contribute to the narrative. Citizen journalists can provide immediate updates during breaking news events, often surpassing

traditional media. As a result, there is now a demand for quicker news cycles and an emphasis on live reporting, altering the expectations of audiences. KI-4 observed that journalists from legacy media are now under increased pressure to churn out content which has created additional pressure that compromises on journalistic standards of ethics and accuracy in pursuit of timeliness.

Another evolution concerns the immediacy of news, according to KI-3. Citizen journalists can quickly share live events, often getting breaking news out before traditional media. With smartphones and social media, anyone can capture and spread news instantly, making it easier and faster for people to get information. Besides, citizen journalism gives a voice to regular people, often highlighting stories and communities that mainstream media might miss. The inclusion of citizens in the journalism agenda makes journalism more inclusive, which helps to share local stories. Gehrke and William (2014) support this finding with their observation of the rapid growth of citizen journalism.

*“There is massive transformation in media because of the technology, social media platforms and how information is disseminated across masses. Platforms like X, Tiktok and Instagram make it easy for people across the globe to interact and engage in different issues of interest” (KI-1).*

According to KI-5, citizen journalism is gradually becoming the preferred source of news owing to its ease of use and access. The informant observes that even the mainstream journalists are getting their news stories from citizen journalists. The mainstream media is playing catch-up by innovating their programming through media convergence to hold on to their audiences.

QCA reveals that mainstream media followed X Space discussions by Gen-Z. For example, Citizen TV’s “Gen-Z on What Next for 'Occupy Uhuru Park' After Police Ban Demos - X Space” recorded also on SCTNEWS: Gen-Z on What Next for 'Occupy Uhuru Park' After Police Ban Demos - X Space. Another example is “Live: Happening Now!!Gen-Zs Occupy Uhuru Park in Remembrance of Victims killed by police” by Mutembei TV, an X Space discussion recorded on YouTube. This discussion on X Space took about 12 hours.

Political discourses were also produced in an X Space hosted by user @kimuzi titled, “Why is Ruto Lying? NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER,” where participants discussed the President’s speech. The discourse was on whether to trust him or continue with the Finance Bill protests. The Space had 451K views as at 9:50 PM on Jun 26, 2024. In the discourse, some participants supported protests while others were against them. @Honeyfarsafi started a fundraising to collect money to go toward the deceased families and pay hospital bills for the injured. “Hello guys. This is an mchanga link (*a contribution link*) for the injured and dead. Please support and help so we’d help everyone who has been harmed. We already contributed for Rex and Evans families and they’ll receive the money today. Please share and contribute.

### **Youth Activism and Digital Storytelling**

KI-4 asserts that youth activism will continue to flourish beyond the recent cries for the rejection of the Finance bill. In fact, Macharia (2015) records that youth activism is no new phenomena. KI-

4 cites the freedom that comes with digital storytelling, and which carries advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include that it is fast; is near omnipresent; and that everybody has an equal chance at digital storytelling, thereby reducing the gaps in communicating across the population. The disadvantages include the lack of patience to verify; some activists lacking storytelling skills; the lack of consistency and focus; the poor having no chance at digital storytelling, thus maintaining a knowledge gap because of poverty; and the presence of fake news.

*“Youth activism and digital storytelling, particularly in the context of recent Gen-Z protests, represent a powerful fusion of technology and social consciousness. Gen-Z, having grown up with digital platforms, uses these tools not just for communication but as a means of storytelling, organizing, and driving societal change” (KI-2).*

KI-1 notes that many of the youth are united and seem to agree on issues that affect them directly. They are creative, seen by how they have capitalized digital storytelling to share the message in the best way they understand and receive it. This finding is supported by Rad (2017), who opines that new technologies have transformed the way information is exchanged. According to this informant, youth activism is impactful, and the youth have proven that they have a voice in major issues affecting the society.

*“Youth activism, especially in the context of recent Gen-Z protests, is significantly empowered by digitalization. The current activists can display their ideologies through social media and other digital platforms. For example, Morara Kebaso, Hanifa, Mercy Taurus and Kasmuel McOure amongst others mainly communicate on X as compared to veteran politicians who depended on rallies” (KI-4).*

KI-3 observes that despite the great digital storytelling skills exhibited by Gen-Zs, they are slowly putting them into a state of mental health crisis. Many do not know how to come out of the negative impacts or criticism. KI-5 posits that young people in Kenya are taking a different approach to activism than the traditional methods witnessed in the past: from mobilization to messaging to street action. Gen-Zs relied on technology and digital media platforms in innovation and creative ways, which took the government and authorities by surprise. Gen-Z activists made use of social media, such as TikTok, Instagram, and X to spread their messages and gather support. Through creative videos, memes, music and art, these young activists effectively conveyed complex issues in a way that resonated with the broader audience, and which created emotional connections. The stories spread rapidly on the internet, sparking global conversations and raising public awareness, ultimately impacting policy discussions. These views form a point of departure from Deutschmann (2023) who records violent protests from the youth, widely different from the Gen-Zs who were largely peaceful.

*“In today's political and social situations, youth activism, particularly among Gen-Z, has evolved to be a powerful force, and digital storytelling is critical to elevating their voices. Recent Gen-Z demonstrations have shown how digital platforms, and narrative tools can shape public opinion, inspire movements, and challenge established conventions. (KI-1) It*

*is an important counter narrative to the stifling effect of moneyed interests dominating legacy media” (KI-3).*

KI-2 postulated that social media allows for quick organization of protests and campaigns, helping young people respond fast to important issues like climate change and social justice while gathering support and spreading awareness instantly.

*“We are slowly moving away from the days when the youth only followed what they found in place, to a present era where young people give theoretical views and opinions on emerging issues. Digital story telling through social media platforms has led to creativity hence capturing the attention of the relevant target audience and inspire action like the #RejectFinanceBill2024” (KI-5).*

*“It is buttressing and redefining the right to freedom of expression and opinions. It is inevitable since every young person can access a smartphone and Internet. A lot of disruptions are bound to happen” (KI-4).*

The QCA unearthed the following: On Saturday, June 22, 2024, X User @osama\_otero started the Space titled: ‘Good Morning Kenya: Where is crazy Nairobi?’ This was after another user Billy Simani going by @CrazyNairobi on the platform went missing in a series of abductions of X users who have large followings and are perceived to be the masterminds behind the online revolution. Kombani Kinyanjui, identified as @KKombani posted the following: “Politicians not allowed to speak. This is massive! Thanks @Osama\_otero #FreeBilly #REJECTFINANCEBILL2024. According to Mbaka (2024), of the Star newspaper, Otero had initially asked X users to boycott Ruto's Space and instead join his parallel engagement on the same platform. When Ruto's Space failed to launch properly after a few attempts, he opted to join Otero's Space alongside State House Spokesperson Hussein Mohammed. A section of Kenyans on X turned the heat on Otero alleging that he had betrayed them. "Osama si ilikuwa ahold a parallel Space na Kimuzi to counter hiyo ya president? (Wasn't Osama supposed to hold a Space with Kimuzi to counter the President's?) Limo asked. Five angry and bitter youth posted the following, "Osama Otero, we will never forget." "Osama Otero is actually the speaker on President William Ruto's X Space," another user said. Kasmuel McOure added: “The gasp I gasped when I heard Ruto's account saying, “Hebu accept (*do accept*) Osama as co-host.”

On digital stories, the QCA reveals the existence of many stories still taking place on X Spaces concerning change brought about by the Gen-Z. Examples include, “LIVE!! Gen-Z's Occupying JKIA?"; and Kenyans on X-Space Breathing Fire at Ruto's Gov't! This conversation has now been archived on YouTube [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_sQmqApntU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_sQmqApntU). Citizen TV also held a Space on June 19, 2024 through the JKL Live show by Jeff Koinange titled, ‘JKLIVE- Gen-Zs 'Occupy Parliament', and ‘The way forward with anti-Finance Bill protests’ This Space garnered 82,916 views and is also archived on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLcJzJta8r0>

The above discourses point to engaged youth who invest their time and money to hold political discourses they believe have a bearing for their future. They freely express anger, bitterness, disdain, and a host of other negative emotions against the political class.

## **Mainstream Media Performance Vs Gen-Z Agenda Setting**

KI-6 stated that the Gen-Z protests showcased a significant shift in communication dynamics, with platforms like X becoming crucial channels for expression, mobilization and discussion among younger generations, a view shared by Mathews (2013). In contrast, mainstream media often lagged in understanding and amplifying the immediacy and authenticity of these online conversations. On her part, KI-7 was of the view that the mainstream media was somewhat sanitized whereby they seemed not to project what was happening on the ground as they selectively gave information to help shape a certain narrative that things were not as bad as they were perceived. On the other hand, the Gen-Z through X Space shared the real issues and equally ensured that this was shared widely, depicting the real situation on the ground where people were genuinely dissatisfied by how some of the issues were being handled. However, KI-2 had a different perspective as demonstrated below and which agrees with Sekar (2020): *X Space set the pace, but mainstream media helped amplify narratives.*

KI-2 had support in KI-3 who shared the following perspective:

*“Gen-Z's use of X Space for political action has transformed the agenda-setting relationship between social media and conventional media. With its speed, authenticity, and direct participation, Gen-Z established the benchmark for national debate in X Space, which became the primary venue for grassroots, real-time activism. However, mainstream media is critical for raising awareness of these issues, providing context, and interacting with institutional stakeholders. Although Gen-Z is increasingly taking the lead in developing the initial narratives, the two systems coexist in a hybrid media environment in which both contribute to shaping the national agenda”.*

According to KI-5, the performance of mainstream media during the Gen-Z protests brought about challenges as well as opportunities. Youth activism on X Space had a significant impact on the national agenda, and mainstream media had to adapt, engage and even collaborate to accurately represent the voices and issues that were at the forefront of these movements. Indeed, this confirms that mainstream media may no longer be significant agenda setters in the fashion of agenda setting theory (Mcombs & Shaw, 1972). The informant stated that mainstream media in Kenya faced a notable challenge during the Gen-Z protests. Despite its usual influential role in shaping the agenda, the rapid dissemination of information on X Space allowed the Gen-Z to exert significant influence on the conversation. Media outlets had to adjust to this change, often reporting on popular topics that originated from discussions led by the youth. Aspects such as immediacy, timeliness, factuality and accuracy were all subject to scrutiny during the protests.

The informant observed that digital media excelled in many areas, particularly in terms of timeliness and immediacy, but fell short in terms of ethics. While digital storytelling has the potential to empower, it also presents risks. The spread of misinformation can undermine trust and weaken the effectiveness of messaging. KI-7 postulated that some mainstream media outlets started to work directly with Gen-Z activists, giving them a chance to share their views and stories.

This teamwork helped connect traditional journalism with the new wave of activism, leading to more detailed coverage of the important issues.

On his part, KI-6 contends that mainstream media remains the major medium of communication, despite the emergence of digital and social media platforms. He noted that most agendas that were being discussed on the X Spaces had been set by the mainstream media, influencing the issues of prominence and relevance to the nation. The challenge that mainstream had, however, was censorship because there is news that needed censorship before being aired to avoid sensationalism. KI-8 supports KI-6's assertions above, reasoning that mainstream media had control measures and was operating under ethics, therefore encountered difficulties deciding what to air for legal reasons, whereas Gen-Z abused the forums to share concerns and go beyond by insulting those they disagreed with. This finding resonates with Nguyen (2011) who sees disruptive media technologies as polarizing agents compared to mainstream media. Information dissemination was prompt. KI-2's argument concerning legacy media's limitations is summarized below:

*“X Space was way ahead in terms of breaking news, giving updates and mobilization. The mainstream media was a bit slow, controlled and gagged”.*

According to KI-1, the mainstream media reported happenings on the X Space during the Gen-Z protests. In fact, the President considered X Space a formal place to address the Gen-Z because it was the movement's meeting point. The informant pointed out the shift from the normal mainstream media interviews to X Spaces, showcasing the space's prominence and importance. KI-6 feels that most people appear to have been taken by surprise by the dynamism of the Gen-Z movement and became more concerned with rationalizing what the Gen-Z movement did as well as stereotype them, instead of contextualizing the movement in the wider, underreported experience of ordinary citizens dealing with corruption and poor governance.

The QCA showed that the title in the *Daily Nation*, “How Kenyans plan to counter President Ruto on X Spaces” may have set the agenda for the day. Posters were also used to set the agenda and sometimes used as backgrounds during the discussions. The *Star* newspaper reported on their Instagram page that X users had on Saturday June 22, 2024, confronted Transport Cabinet Secretary (CS) Kipchumba Murkomen over the whereabouts of an influencer known as Billy alias Crazy Nairobian. Murkomen who had joined an X Space dubbed, “Good Morning Kenya: Where is Crazy Nairobian?” was confronted after being invited to speak on issues affecting Kenyans. One of the hosts, Osama Otero asked, “Where is Billy? That's what we want to hear.” The CS responded by saying that he was not aware of Billy's case. A co-host on the Space then told Murkomen that since he had said he was there to listen to the people, he should tell his 'people' to release Billy. “You've said you are not aware of it, so tell your people to let go of Billy unconditionally. Billy has done no crime and if they are charging him let them forward the chargesheet. We just need Billy released.” In response, Murkomen said that he was ready to help them if they needed his help in finding Billy. “No problem. If you need my help, I'm ready.” Murkomen added, “I have heard you and I will pass the message to the relevant authorities.”



Emojis and emoticons were constantly used in the conversations to accentuate the moods and spice the conversation, as is synonymous with digital chats and conversations. Editorial cartoons in the mainstream media also focused on setting the protest agenda through caricatures. The study could not exhaust all the posts since they are many. The analysis confirms a growing mass participation in news discourses on digital media taking precedence over legacy media as stated earlier in the abstract. The age of disruptive technologies and the production of social-political discourses, and an active, critical and content-producing mass are evident from the analysis of the sampled examples.

## **6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study sought to assess Gen-Z's political activism and production of discourses on X Space, specifically on youth activism, digital storytelling, change in journalism dynamics and the performance of mainstream media viz-a-viz the Gen-Zs in setting the nation's agenda. Society is currently living in a time of rapid technological disruptions with a formidable task to keep up with the speed at which technology is evolving.

The study found out that youth activism has been with us for ages, but given the digital disruptions, young people have evolved in activism. Even when they went to the streets, it was after they had had significant discourses on X Spaces- planned, mobilized and executed the protests. Their form of activism generated intense interest from Africa and the world concerning the level of organization where strangers with a common cause meet online and physically to protest a perceived injustice.

The study also showed that digital storytelling is an emerging powerful voice that youth activists are using for political protest. It represents a powerful fusion of technology and social consciousness, where the young people project their voices of concern. They are creative in the use of digital storytelling, particularly in the way they use text and images to register their protest. Unlike the older politicians who require rallies to address the masses, the current youth activists employ creativity to display their ideologies through social media and other digital platforms.

Citizen journalism has fundamentally altered the dynamics of traditional journalism, reshaping the way news is gathered, reported, and consumed. Anyone, trained or untrained, can now gather and disseminate news, eliminating the traditional journalism role of gatekeeping. Citizen journalism is becoming popular in the digital era where people have access to smartphones and the internet, hence obtaining the news individually. Consequently, people have become more research-oriented, seeking to verify whether what they are receiving is true. The democratization of journalism voices has ensured all voices are represented.

With the recent Gen-Z protests, mainstream media played catch-up as it struggled to keep up with the many discourses emerging from X Spaces. The Gen-Zs would set the nation's agenda from online discourses, which would then be reported by the mainstream media. Mainstream media lagged in understanding and amplifying the immediacy and authenticity of these online conversations. However, the youth sometimes failed to engage in responsible discourses where they would use unsavoury language. Thus, this study recommends that traditional media aim to

fully align with the opportunities presented in disruptive innovative developments. This will ensure that their business models are transformed for sustainability. The study also recommends that the Kenyan media grab the opportunity to re-evaluate their approach to gathering and disseminating news in the modern age.

### Suggestions for Future Research

- Future researchers could explore a content analysis of a single X Space to interrogate its use in fostering political discourses.
- Future research can also explore a quantitative approach targeting the impact of these digital spaces on youth activism and mainstream media.

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