

Good and bad of UCC 'blanket' over internet

In my column last week (see, "Elections: Do not wave a false flag" – *Daily Monitor*, January 9), I warned about the possibility of Ugandans – particularly social media communicators and citizen journalists – raising or falling for false flags before, during or immediately after the January 15 presidential, parliamentary and local government elections.

I also cautioned that it is always important to question the content we find on the internet or on social media. It is not always what it appears to be. It could be fake.

One of the examples I gave of "false flags" on social media was the purported notice by Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) that the internet would be shut down across the country on January 8 to ensure "security" during and in the aftermath of the elections. The notice was widely shared on social media.

Thankfully – or so we thought – UCC came out immediately with a public statement dismissing the purported notice as fake. But as it turned out shortly, what was fake about the notice was the date and addressee [the public].

Because barely a week later, UCC wrote to all licensed Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to shut down the internet on January 13 effective at 1800hrs "following strong recommendation from Inter-Agency Security Committee".

Whereas during previous elections only social media was switched off – for the same reasons, this time round it is the entire world-wide-web (www) over this portion of the world.

Thus as I write this column, an unprece-

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dent communication blanket has been thrown over the entire country. The good news is that there will be no false flags that we earlier feared because there are no tools to hoist them, nor eyes to see them. Conversely – and the bad news – is that there will be no "true flags" either, because similarly, there are no tools to hoist them, no eyes to see them, and no voices to amplify them. The winner in this scenario is darkness.

Figuratively speaking, a lot of things happen under big blankets such as this – some good, some bad. Their "goodness" or "badness" only gets known a lot later because nothing gets hidden forever. The Acholi perhaps have the best saying to illustrate this. It goes something like this: "Even if you made love to your mother-in-law on the floor of the lake, one day the secret will ooze out" and behold...!

So come rain, come sunshine, Ugandans will still get to know what happened under this unprecedented nationwide internet communication blanket during the January 15, 2026 General Election. The details

may remain murky for a while, but the results will be loud and clear.

Regardless, one of the most important lessons from this episode for the public is the importance and inter-connectedness of human rights, particularly the tenets pertaining to communication – i.e. freedom of expression, freedom of thought and conscience, freedom to impart one's thoughts and information, etc. Equally important is how in the modern world these are inextricably weaved into information and communications technology (ICT).

A blanket over these human rights – whatever the motivation – does not affect just one or two individuals, or even a group of people of certain persuasion. It affects everyone across the board! So it does not matter what your political opinions are on this election or on the candidates in the races, or whether you are doing politics, business or just sitting at home with a smartphone. You are all impacted, the levels of inconvenience notwithstanding.

In terms of media freedom – legacy or social media – freedom is not just for the journalists, bloggers, influencers, etc. It is for everyone one of us including consumers of their content. Freedom of expression is not just for journalists, politicians, human rights activists, etc. It is for every one of us.

Freedom of thought is not just for the professors, literary writers and those that think big. It is for every one of us – even us small thinkers. Freedom to impart ideas is not just for teachers and politicians. It is for every one of us.

Which is why a blanket thrown over an overarching tool of communication that the internet is today is bad for every one of us.

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