

There is a huge absence of government officials clarifying many things floating around social media, which eventually make their way into the mainstream media, writes **Nelson Bwire**

BY NELSON BWIRE

In January 2021, Facebook (now Meta) removed a network of accounts and pages linked to the Ugandan government's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology alleging "coordinated inauthentic behaviour", such as using fake and duplicate accounts to impersonate users, comment on content, and artificially boost the popularity of posts during the presidential campaigns.

Among accounts that were removed by Meta was one of my long term friend and comrade Duncan Abigaba, whose misfortunes as a digital freedom fighter have ensured he is less appreciated than revered by the current crop of keyboard warriors operating from every nook and cranny.

The likes of Abigaba and other well-meaning pro-government gentlemen and ladies were operating with me in the social media war zone, and managed to go toe-toe with the obscurantism and ill-meaning Opposition propaganda during the campaign period. Unfortunately, even in a just war, good people can be extinguished. Mr Abigaba and several others left us to decode the memoirs of fight with Opposition until Facebook was officially closed here.

The 2021 elections came with a group of youth who were uninterested in debate, cared less about facts, overstated their intellect, overrated their importance, devoid of shame and decorum that they rain on you all tribes of insults and threats and won't care whether you are the Prime Minister, the Speaker of Parliament or anyone above those two.

Shortly after the death of Gen Elly Tumwine, President Museveni posted a message on social media castigating the crass behaviour by certain overzealous anti-government elements who

Why Ugandan media, youth remain a headache to govt

chose jubilation over mourning such a great freedom fighter.

Alas, the replies we obtained immediately, and those later on were in the red line! In any case, it has become the norm today in what these elements call "hate watching", to pray for high ranking government officials or those who have been known to be perpetual defenders of the regime to meet death or extreme misfortunes such that they can be mocked and taunted alive or posthumously.

In one of my occasional TV talk show appearances, a young panelist off camera intimated that the reason they celebrate our misfortunes is because we continue flaunting a government which has overseen the worst events upon their lives and the country at large; he mentioned pathetic levels of unemployment, wanton violation of human rights, and dilapidation of every aspect of infrastructure and administration.

People many times need spectacles when their eyesight is vanishing as in this very case, but even then you need to make the correct diagnosis so that you obtain the correct lens range, or whether to reduce the lighting. The achievements of this government are in glaring lights!

The self-proclaimed Uganda Twitter (X) President Nova Gideon Kwikiriza has been hammering a 'point' home, stating that the officials in government at all levels have lost touch with the population, particularly the youth. Mr Kwikiriza and his group of social media warriors rely on mostly volunteered unverified content as well as government laxity to combat certain topics both in enemy media and anti-government profiles, to carry this poisoned gospel forward.

I can argue for the fact that in many cases they are right, because there is a huge absence of government officials clarifying many things floating around social media, which eventually make their way into the mainstream media, unverified and unresponded to.

Mr Godwin Toko, who has devoted his entire social media life to critiquing



What can be done.

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promptly, they should be the first always with the information, they should operate in a digital first strategy where they set the agenda, and not chase the agenda. The government should ensure availability of personnel not to copy and paste replies of each other, but to engage with information and knowledge."

-Mr Nelson Bwire, the author.

everything related to the government, together with his group of AGORA host several live streams on X, and while the livestreams attract a litany of like-minded chaps, they have failed to obtain even a handful of pro-government people willing to take the hot seat and clarify government's position.

AGORA now claims that many of their live streams, in which they expect a government expert or communicator, have all failed to kick off, while those where they call the Opposition officials and propagandists have been enjoyable that they even go over the stipulated time.

I must also argue for Mr Toko and group, they provided me ample time

to discuss President Museveni's stand on Ugandan media, albeit from a personal understanding, despite stumbling on their livestream initially uninvited, a fruitful conversation was had, and there was a bit of relief. Same as Mr Kwikiriza, who has accepted dialogue with different government officials and me to rectify some issues.

From the sidelines of TV appearances, several journalists gather with quick questions that require direct answers or issues that need clarification; sometimes, we simply discuss any topics to enlighten each other. You cannot imagine how much false information is on its fast feet out there, and all it requires is interaction and candid conversations.

This shows that many of our young people in media and social media have the general willingness to interact with the right information; they just don't have it, and no one seems willing to provide it. The gap keeps getting wider and wider, and that explains the reporting on the government and its activities.

Last month, at the requiem mass of Next Media journalist Julius Kitone held at Omuka Restaurant in Naguru, while Opposition sent 11 leaders to attend and commiserate with the journalism fraternity, only about two of us were available from the government side.

The National Unity Platform (NUP) alone, sent seven members led by MPs-elect George Musisi, Zambaali Mukasa, and Kampala Lord Mayor-elect Ronald Balimwezo. The Alliance for National Transformation (ANT) was also ably represented by its secretary general, Ms Alice Alaso, and all of these people spoke.

The government was spared blushes when State minister for Information, Communication Technology and National Guidance (National Guidance) Kabyanga Baluku organised transport for media practitioners and sent a message to the family in Rakai.

However, the situation was symbolic of the distance between government and media, but that is not an isolated event.

Several media personnel have ex-

pressed how hard it is to host government personnel for anything, with many expressing that whenever they intend to offer government the opportunity to communicate, they find no willing soul and their calls to different departmental communication heads go unanswered for days, weeks and even months.

This has been the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party plague; the inability to be available swiftly, to respond to several things on social media, to absence of information on social media, leaving the population to shape their own opinions through Opposition agenda, the absence of government officials and communicators in different media activities to fraternise with the industry so that there is opportunity for fair comment. And there is the disease of not picking phone calls, which is the problem with almost everyone in government including those holding vital communication offices.

Little wonder that Gen Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the chief of defence forces (CDF), said the NRM is reactive rather than proactive.

If the NRM-led government is meant to bring back the media and youth into the fold, its officials should bring the engagement to them, they should respond promptly, they should be the first always with the information, they should operate in a digital first strategy where they set the agenda, and not chase the agenda. The government should ensure availability of personnel not to copy and paste replies of each other, but to engage with information and knowledge.

There are now more than 12 million Ugandans across three social media platforms (Whatsapp, X and TikTok), 70 percent of these are 40 years and below and leaving them unengaged will not only cause persistent headache for the NRM government, but will cause even worse coverage problems in general media.

The writer is the online editor for State House Uganda.