# Analysis of Twitter Activity During the 2016 Presidential Debates in Uganda

**Monitoring Uganda Elections Series 01**
**#UgDebate16**
**February 2016**

**Introduction**

The 2015/2016 electioneering season in Uganda set a precedent in the use of social media as a means for politicians to reach out and engage with citizens. It was the first time in Uganda that a candidate announced they would run for President via YouTube and also saw candidate Yoweri Museveni (the incumbent) seek out a more tech-savvy media team to keep abreast with the widening channels of civic engagement. While some of the candidates maintained personal Twitter accounts and actively engaged in the online conversations, others remained dormant, although they had Twitter accounts.

## Country statistics

**37,101,745** Population *(July 2015 Est.)*

**15,277,196** Registered Voters *(December 2015)*

**29** Registered Political Parties

**12,986,216** Internet users *(June 2015)*

*Table 1: Overview of the 2016 Uganda presidential candidates' social media presence as at February 2016*

| Candidate | Political Party | Twitter handle | Twitter Followers | Tweets posted |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abed Bwanika | People's Development Party | @AbedBwanika | 5,683 | 3,136 |
| Amama Mbabazi | Independent | @AmamaMbabazi | 141,000 | 4,726 |
| Benon Biraaro | Farmers' Party of Uganda | @benonbiraaro | 455 | 28 |
| Joseph Mabirizi | Independent | @MabiriziEJ | 1,930 | 404 |
| Maureen Kyalya | Independent | @MaureenKyalya | 439 | 32 |
| Venansius Baryamureeba | Independent | @Baryamureeba | 2,005 | 928 |
| Warren Kizza Besigye Kifefe | Forum For Democratic Change | @kizzabesigye1 | 34,700 | 2,157 |
| Yoweri Kaguta Museveni | National Resistance Movement | @KagutaMuseveni | 213,000 | 1,335 |

This report is the first in a three-part series which presents an overview of the key themes shaping the online conversation of Ugandans during the electioneering process. The report explores the level of Twitter activity, interaction and conversational trends with specific focus on the #UgDebate16 hashtag during the 1st presidential debate held on January 15, 2016 and 2nd debate, which was held on February 13, 2016. During both debates, the hashtag trended locally and gained popularity as far as South Africa.
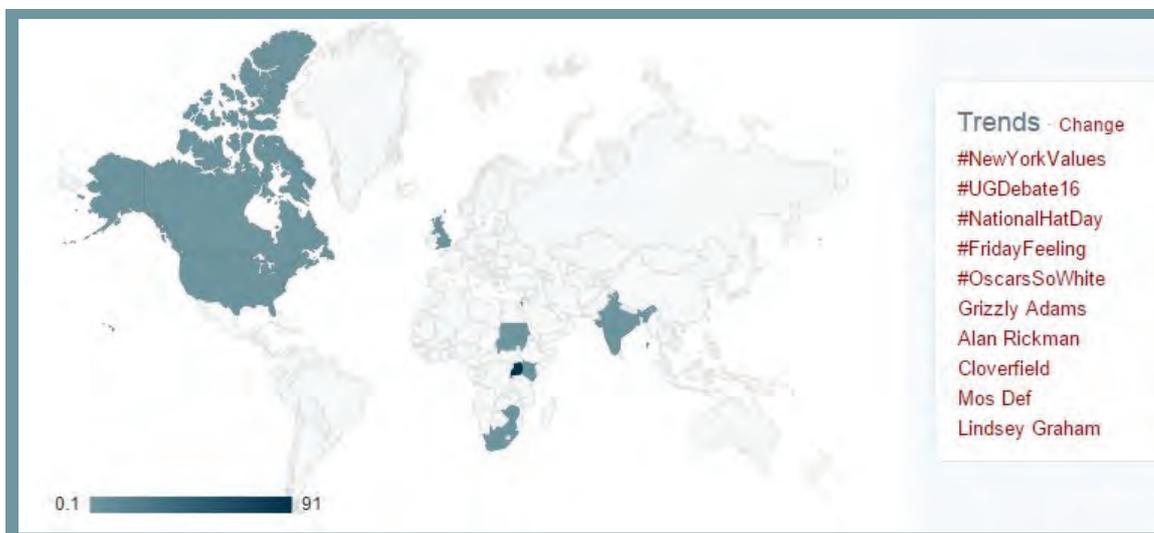


*Figure 1: Map of countries with the dominant trending topics including the hashtag #UGDebate16. Picture Source: PCTechMag*



*Figure 2: The second presidential debate become a trending topic in South Africa. Picture Source: @TrendieZA*

The open source statistical programming language R was used alongside image generator ggplot2 library and the open source graphics tool inkscape to collate data. Tweets were sourced through tweetreach.com and www.hashtracking.com.

The analysis is based upon a random selection of tweets posted during each of the debates. In the first debate, 20,000 tweets were analysed while a larger sample of 70,000 tweets was analysed in the second debate.

*Table 2: #UGDebate16 Figures*

| Presidential Debates | Number of tweets | Timeline | Analysed | Tweets with Hashtag #UgDebate16 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1st debate | 100,000 | 18.00 – 00.00 | 20,000 | 85% |
| 2nd debate | 120,000 | 21.00 – 01.00 | 70,000 | 88% |

## Results Highlights

- There was more Twitter activity in the second debate than there was during the first debate. Over the course of six hours of the first debate on January 15, 2016, the hashtag #UGDebate16 registered over 100,000 tweets. In only fours the second debate on February 13, 2016 registered over 120,000 tweets under the same hashtag.

- There was continued mention of candidate Mabirizi mainly related to humour. The colloquialism of his name to Mabreezy was also rampant.

- Overall there was increased media engagement in the second debate compared to the first. The media houses that were most engaged included NBS TV and NTV Uganda for television while the Daily Monitor and New Vision were popular among print media. The online news service Uganda Radio Network was also highly engaged.

- Some candidates' accounts remained active during the debate and they maintained a competitive online presence.

- Conversation around moderators was mostly negative in the second debate compared to the first.

- Sentiment was mostly positive for both debates as online conversation maintained a positive outlook in the lead-up to elections.

- Auto-generated accounts built to mimic human users through the use of local images and local names, commonly referred to as bots, played a key role in maintaining the strong online presence of the incumbent. There were reports of similar social media tactics being used by at least one opposition candidate's team.

**Analysis**

## Tweet Interactions: Tweets vs. Retweets vs. Replies

During the first debate, 56% of the content related to #UGDebate16 comprised retweets, while 44% remained organic tweets. In the second debate, there was a slight change, with 60% of the content being retweets while 40% of the tweets remained organic.

Only 1% of all tweets received any reply during the course of both debates. This is probably an indication that tweeps were active in following the conversation through retweets but it also reflects limited direct engagement with content posted on the platform. In addition, it implies passiveness by many tweeps in actual contribution to the online conversation. It is possible, however, that after the live debate, tweeps reviewed tweets and made responses/comments to tweets directed at them or contributed to the overall conversation under the hashtag.

This low engagement is likely due to the nature of following a live event where focus is dedicated towards following the proceedings rather than to responding to tweets. The fast pace at which tweets flow further limits the amount of time dedicated towards generating responses.

For both debates, retweets were highest at the onset of the debate, dropping slightly as it progressed. Towards the end of both debates, there was another spike in retweets but not to the same extent as at the beginning of the debate.
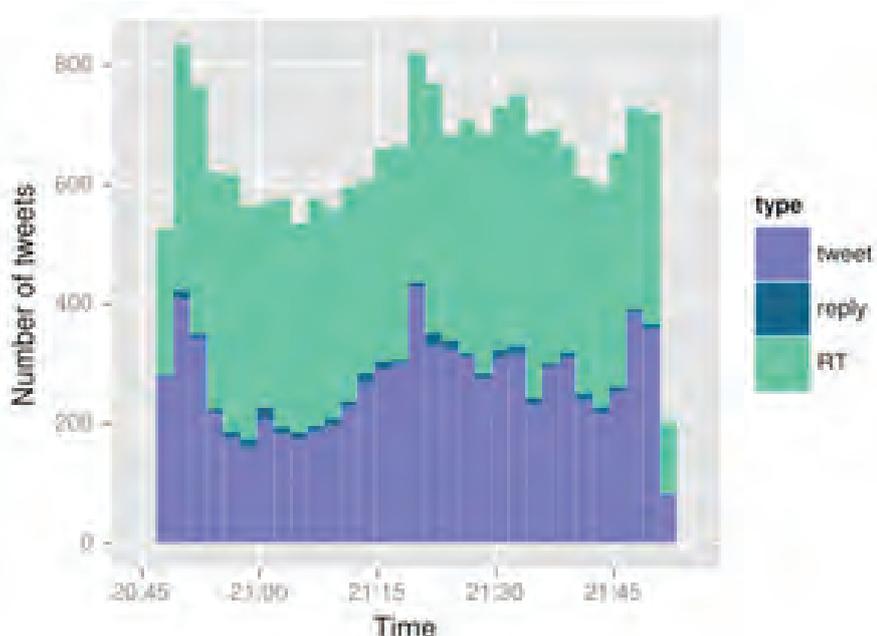


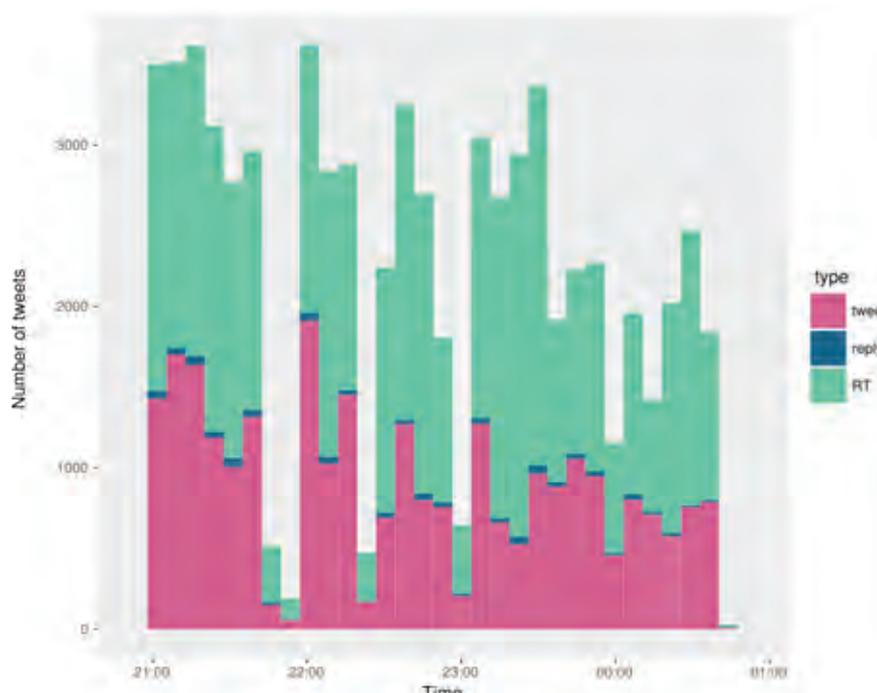*Figure 3: Level of interaction through tweets, replies and retweets during the first debate*



*Figure 4: Level of interaction through tweets, replies and retweets during the second debate*

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# Who Curated the Online Conversation?

During the first debate, among the top tweeps were what appeared to be Twitter bots, that is, auto-generated accounts built to mimic human users of the social networking service through the use of online sourced images and local names. Twitter bots can be used to produce automated posts on Twitter, or to automatically follow Twitter users. During the Uganda presidential debates, bots gave competition to tweets posted by media houses and candidates whose teams did not employ bots. However, the second debate had legitimate Twitter accounts dominating the conversation, with some being the originators of more than 200 tweets during the course of the debate.

Accounts like @UsamahMpindi, @kanyesigyejames and the media outlet Uganda Radio Network (@ugandarn) stood out with large numbers of tweets shared to followers during the second debate. @kanyesigirejames also ranked high in the first debate.

**Table 3: Top 10 Tweeters during the Uganda Presidential Debates[1]**

## 1st Debate

| | Presumed Bot | No of tweets |
|---|---|---|
| @fortunedavid | ✓ | 221 |
| @paulsenabulya | ✓ | 112 |
| @Jude_Mugabi | ✗ | 94 |
| @KanyesigyeJames | ✗ | 93 |
| @mac2tweety | ✗ | 86 |
| @kevrx | ? | 77 |
| @TukundaneYonna | ✗ | 70 |
| @sparlokutcher | ✗ | 69 |
| @Jadwong | ? | 66 |
| @HabatNkoola | ? | 63 |

*Yes* ✓ *No* ✗ *Not sure* ?

## 2nd Debate

| | Presumed Bot | No of tweets |
|---|---|---|
| @UsamahMpindi | ✗ | 538 |
| @PeterFr43417414 | ? | 311 |
| @ugandarn | ✗ | 306 |
| @KanyesigyeJames | ✗ | 304 |
| @elizabethphiona | ✗ | 281 |
| @jhuli_8 | ✗ | 253 |
| @KalShalom | ✗ | 194 |
| @LorenzaJulius | ? | 183 |
| @GalaxyFMUg | ✗ | 170 |
| @SMSMediaUganda | ✗ | 169 |

*Yes* ✓ *No* ✗ *Not sure* ?

## Media's Role in the Online Discussion

Traditionally, the media have set the agenda for public conversation, including on politics. However, with the advent of citizen journalism and the rise in the use of social media platforms, citizens are increasingly determining not only the agenda for public conversation but also driving the conversation.

During the second debate, the media faced strong competition from the accounts of candidates in steering the online conversation. As figure 5 below shows, only Museveni's account beat the NTV and NBS TV accounts in the number of retweets of their accounts. Figures 6 and 7 show the popularity of media houses mentioned in tweets and retweets during the two debates.

Figure 5: Graph representing the most retweeted accounts. These belonged mostly to candidates and media houses.

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# Top Mentions of Media Houses

Top media houses with repeated mentions in tweets, retweets and replies were NTV, NBS, Daily Monitor and New Vision. This can be attributed to their strong online following across multiple media platforms. In the first debate, NTV had most mentions, followed by Daily Monitor and NBS. In the second debate, NBS took the top spot, followed by NTV, with Daily Monitor emerging third.
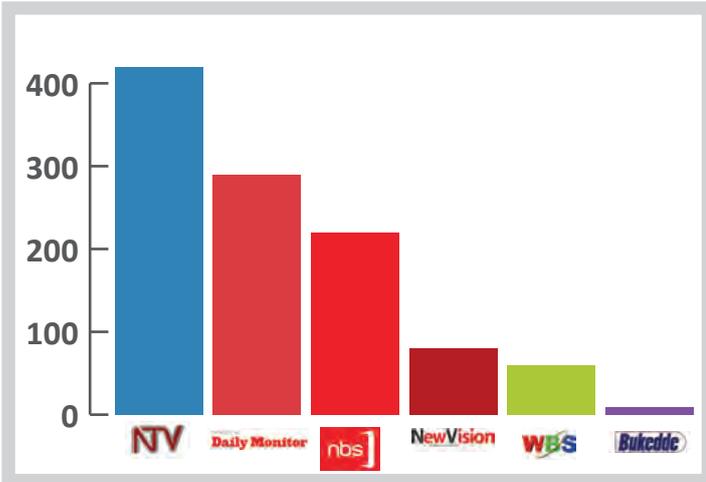


Figure 6: Most popular media houses through mention in tweets and retweets during the first debate
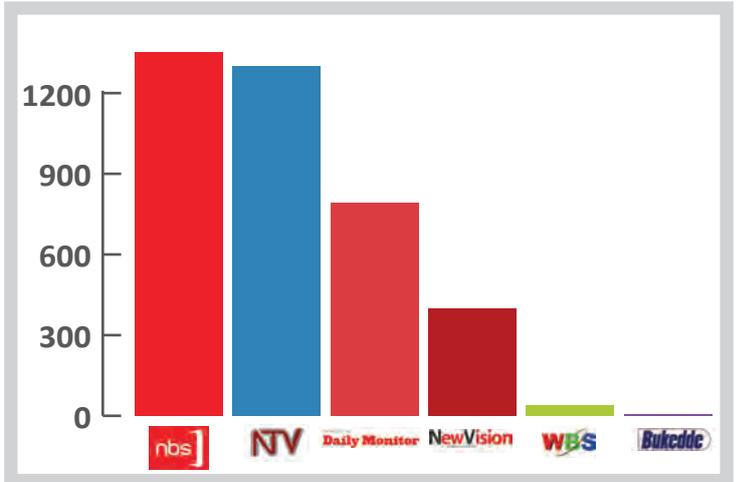


Figure 7: Most popular media houses through mention in tweets and retweets during the second debate

# Who is Tweeting? Bots or Humans?

There were peculiar patterns of retweeted content appearing for some accounts. These accounts did not appear to generate original content either. A closer analysis indicates that these accounts were likely 'bots' - all tweeting and retweeting duplicate content simultaneously. An estimated 5,000 bots were utilised to tweet during the second presidential debate to popularise content supportive of the incumbent, Yoweri Museveni. See examples in the figures below of two suspected bot accounts with the same content retweeted during the second debate.



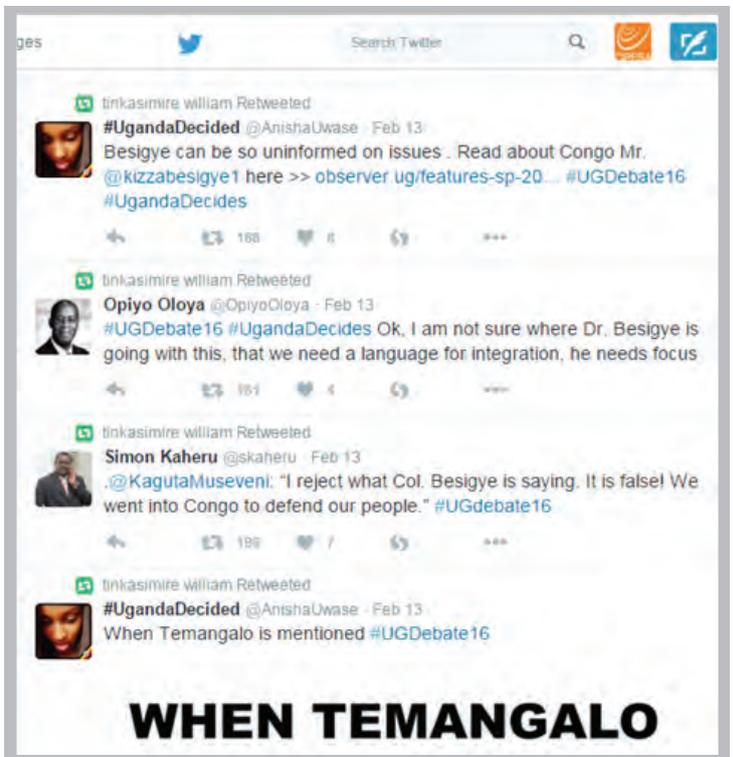Figure 8: Sample of suspected bot account @mathew_se



Figure 9: Sample of suspected bot account @tinkasimirewil

Another pattern that emerged was that all the suspected bots/paid accounts appeared to have been created between October and December 2012. See for instance @narncymak @kerra_n95 and @swaibusempala who both had the same tweets, the last of which all happened at 11:16 pm EAT on the night of the second debate. All the suspected bots sourced content from tweets mostly posted by accounts affiliated to the incumbent's campaign team, including those belonging to @TeamSevo, @SarahKagingo, @KiryowaKiwanuka, @DonWanyama, and @NRMMedia.

However, bots supporting Kizza Besigye were also picked up, such as the one shown in figure 10.



*Figure 10: Suspected bot for Kizza Besigye. The account has since been deleted.*

## Top Mentions of Candidates

In order to analyse top candidate mentions, a set of keywords which included case sensitive and non-case sensitive spellings of candidates' names were used in analysis. For instance, for Kizza Besigye, keywords included "besigye", "Besigye", "kizza" and "Kizza". A count of the mentions per tweet was aggregated and the results show that Museveni, Besigye, Mabirizi and Kyalya had the highest number of mentions in the second debate.

It should also be noted that colloquialisms of names and memes steered some Twitter users away from the use of actual candidates' names. For instance, Mabirizi was repeatedly referred to as "Mabreezy", Amama Mbabazi as "JPAM" and Museveni as "M7".

During the second debate there was a large gap between the mentions of Museveni in comparison to the other candidates. As mentioned earlier, this could be attributed to the role of 'bots', which were pushing tweets for Museveni.

However, Museveni's dominance of Twitter mentions could also be attributed to his presence at the second debate. He snubbed the first debate, dismissing it as insignificant to his campaign as it excluded a large percentage of the Ugandan population who had no access to television.
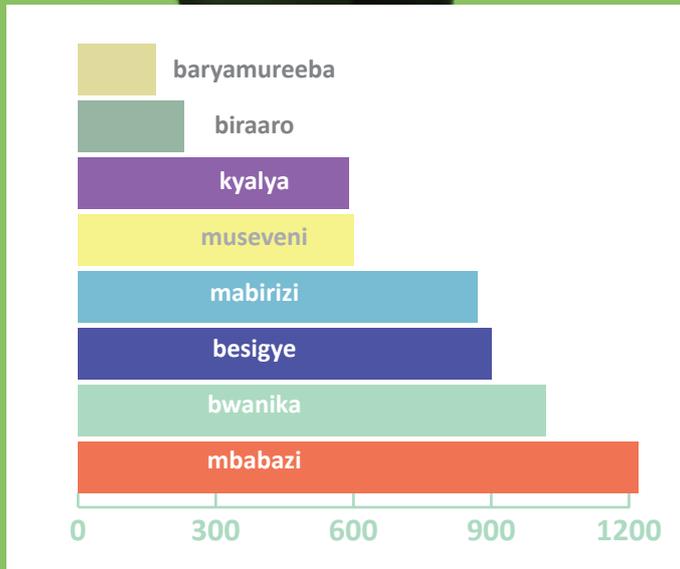




*Figure 11:Popularity of candidate names through mention in tweets and retweets during the first debate*
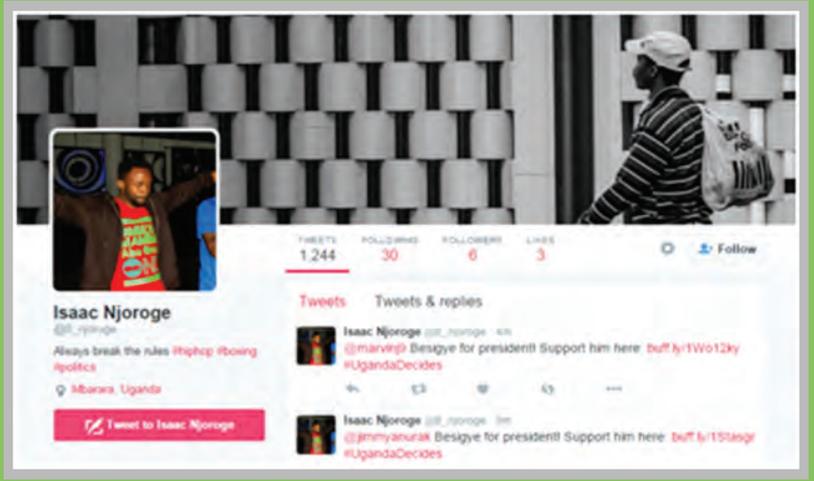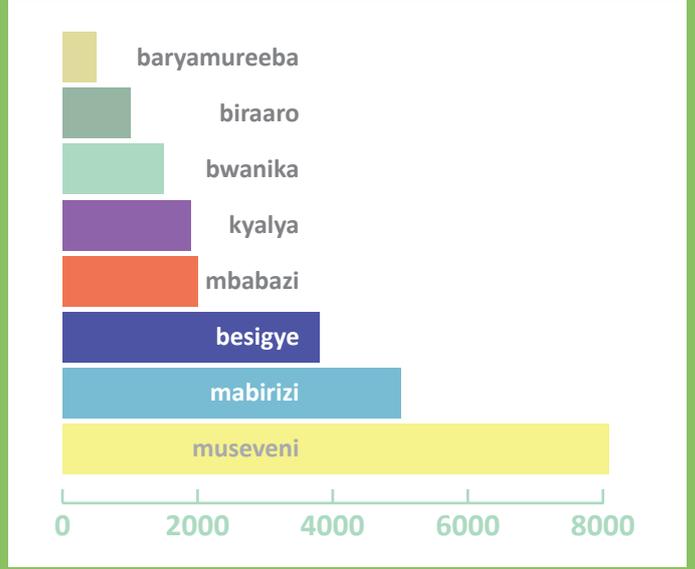
*Figure 12: Popularity of candidate names through mention in tweets and retweets during the second debate*

It should be noted that Mabirizi received repeated mentions but with colloquialisms applied to his name, such as "Mabreezy". This analysis focused on the correct spellings of candidates' names found in the sampled tweets.



*Figures 13: Candidate Mabirizi's post retweeted (top left) and a tweet with a colloquialism of the name Mabreezy*

# Emotional Polarities

This study referred to the NRC Emotion Lexicon to associate emotion to the words used in tweet content. The lexicon is built upon sentiments which were collected manually and associated with eight basic emotions (anger, fear, anticipation, trust, surprise, sadness, joy, and disgust) and two sentiments (negative and positive).

Overall, tweeps' sentiment was mostly positive during both debates. There appeared to be more positivity than negativity in the tweets shared by most users.

For both debates, the emotions of trust and anticipation ranked highly in relation to overall content shared during the course of the debates, indicating optimism as the first of such debates took place in Uganda. The emotions of anger, surprise and disgust ranked low.
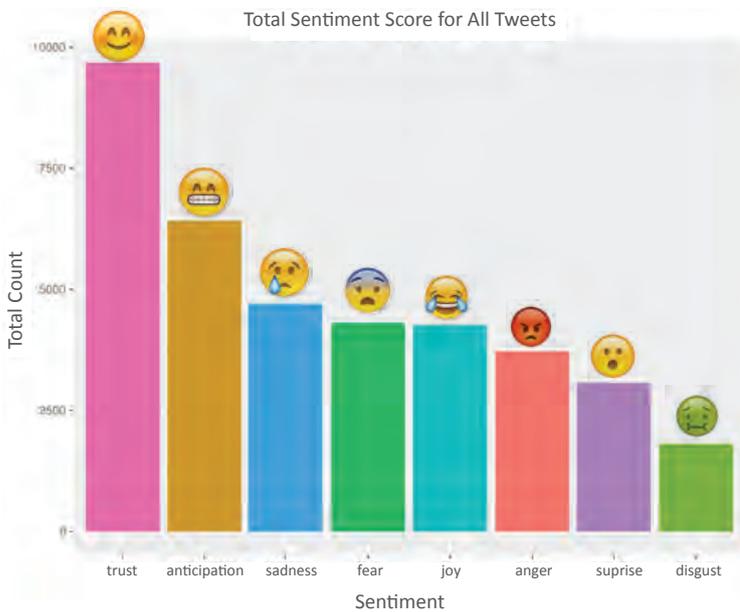


*Figure 14: Sentiment analysis of tweets during the first debate*
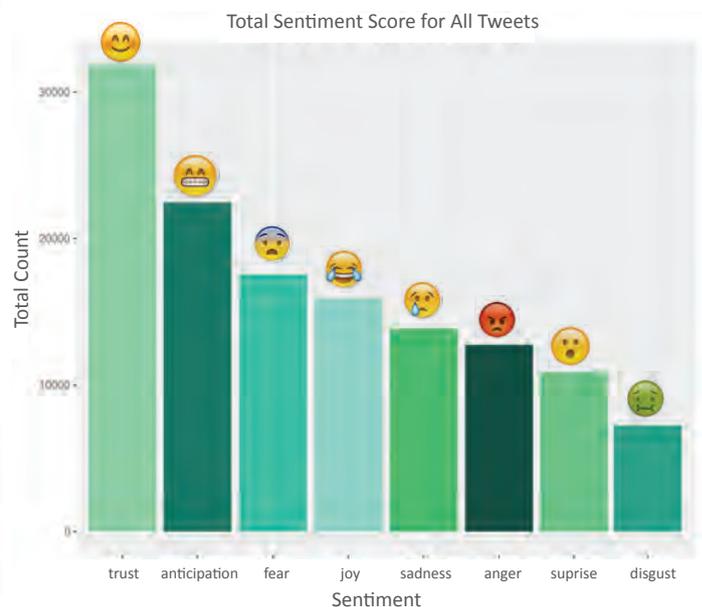


*Figure 15: Sentiment analysis of tweets during the second debate.*

However, despite an overall positive outlook, there are specific areas which received particularly negative emotion. Whereas in the first debate sadness was expressed alongside words like 'police', 'schools', 'youth', and 'medicine', the second debate, which was mostly geared toward discussing foreign policy, revealed sadness alongside words such as 'regional', 'insecurity', and 'university'. This may be attributed to events surrounding neighbouring conflict countries like Congo and Somalia and terrorist attacks in Kenya. For both debates, the word 'war' received prominent mention.
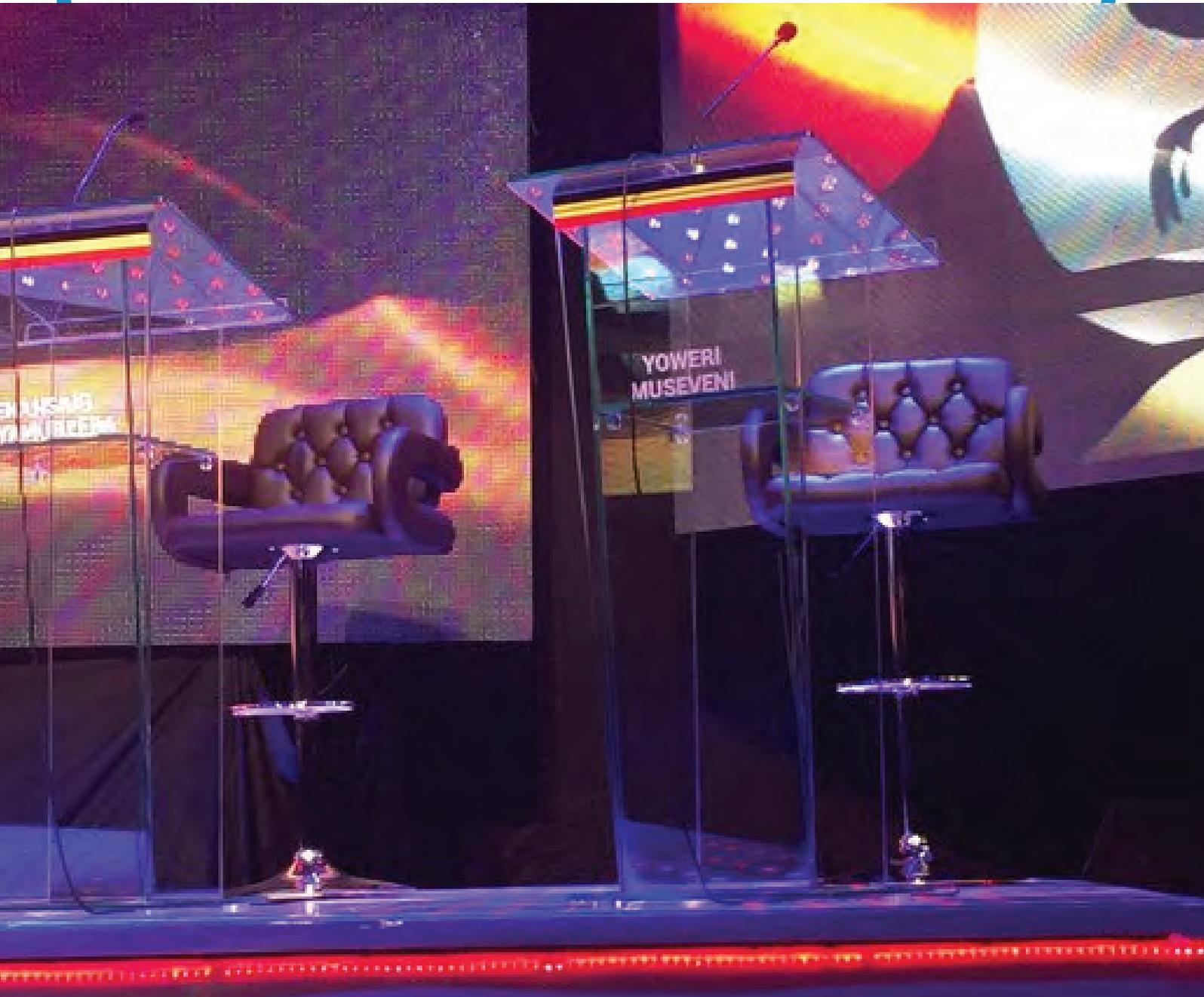
During the first debate, some level of anger was expressed around the word president, likely due to Museveni's absence. However, in the second debate, Mabirizi is the candidate whose name featured prominently in angry tweets due to his late arrival and some of his responses during the debate, which some tweeps found disappointing.

The feeling of disgust was more pronounced in the second debate with focus on moderator Shaka Ssali for allegedly not actively asking questions compared to the two other moderators. Words such as 'silenced' and 'quiet' appeared with repeated reference to him.



*Figure 16: Tag cloud of emotions expressed during the first debate*



*Figure 17: Tag cloud of emotions expressed during the second debate*

**Part two of the Monitoring Uganda Elections Series reports will explore Twitter activity pre elections (February 17, 2016) vs elections day (February 18, 2016) using the hashtag #UgandaDecides.**