The Impact of Legal Repression on Citizen Online Behavior: Evidence from Tanzania's Jamii Forums

Fatih Serkant Adiguzel, Nuzulack Dausen, Diego Romero, and Erik Wibbels

Sabancı University, Nukta Africa, Utah State University, and University of Pennsylvania

Objective

Over the last twenty years, repressive-minded governments have adopted a rapidly increasing number of policies to control their citizens' online behavior. Tanzania is also experiencing a decline in media freedom, especially after the government passed the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 –the first Tanzanian legal act restricting Internet activity– which posed a significant threat to freedom of expression by targeting Jamii Forums, Tanzania's leading social media platform. A lack of quantitative data currently limits the ability of policymakers to understand the effects of such restrictive legislation on citizens' online behavior. Thus, we conducted a sentiment analysis to analyze the restrictions on users' digital presence. In this report, we use the Jamii Forums data to understand the scale, impact, and implications of legal repression on users' online presence.

Questions and Approach

We focused on the country Tanzania as our case study, a country whose media restrictions reflect the ongoing process of autocratization since the election of President John Magufili in 2015. As the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 directly targeted Jamii Forums –a platform notable for anonymous whistle-blowing and breaking news– we investigated the trends in critical posting against the Tanzanian government before and after this act.

To analyze the effects of the Cybercrimes Act of 2015, we created a dataset consisting of over 11.5 million Jamii Forum posts that had been uploaded between 2006 and 2021. After machine-translating the posts into English, we tagged posts as *government-relevant* if they contained the following words: "CCM," "president," "government," "Magufuli," "minister," or "Kikwete." These key words referred to the main political actors between 2006 and 2021, including both presidents before and after the 2015 Tanzanian elections. We then utilized a large language model (LLM) to conduct a sentiment analysis on *government-relevant* posts——which labelled each post based on its emotional tone (negative, positive, or neutral)——allowing us to track the overall trends in sentiment towards the Tanzanian government over time.

Findings

After comparing the volume of *government-relevant* and political posts on Jamii Forums during different time periods, we found that the average number of daily posts considerably increased during the 2015 election period and the passage of the Cybercrimes Act, suggesting that the law did not restrict citizens' online behaviors. However, thousands of users had suspended posting on political threads just before the law took effect. The increased volume in daily posts consisted of additional entries by the same users and an influx of new accounts.

Thus, we used our data to compare the sentiments of posts by inactive and new accounts. Figure 1 depicts the prevalence of posts demonstrating negative sentiments towards government actors by inactive and active users. We found that new users and lapsed users shared the same critical sentiments towards the government, suggesting that the repressive law had likely motivated citizens to strategically open new accounts to avoid censorship.

Policy Implications

The data on Jamii Forums has provided valuable insights to improve our understanding of the influence of government repression on citizens' online behavior. Once the Cybercrimes Law went into effect, the government began using it to prosecute various Jamii Forums users, including founder Maxence Melo. The decline in thousands of accounts depicts the Tanzanian government's aggression and success in dissuading citizens from online discussion and further whistle-blowing. In the future, we hope these results will help decision makers better understand the ways in which legal restrictions can demobilize citizens. We will also examine a more nuanced picture in future works.
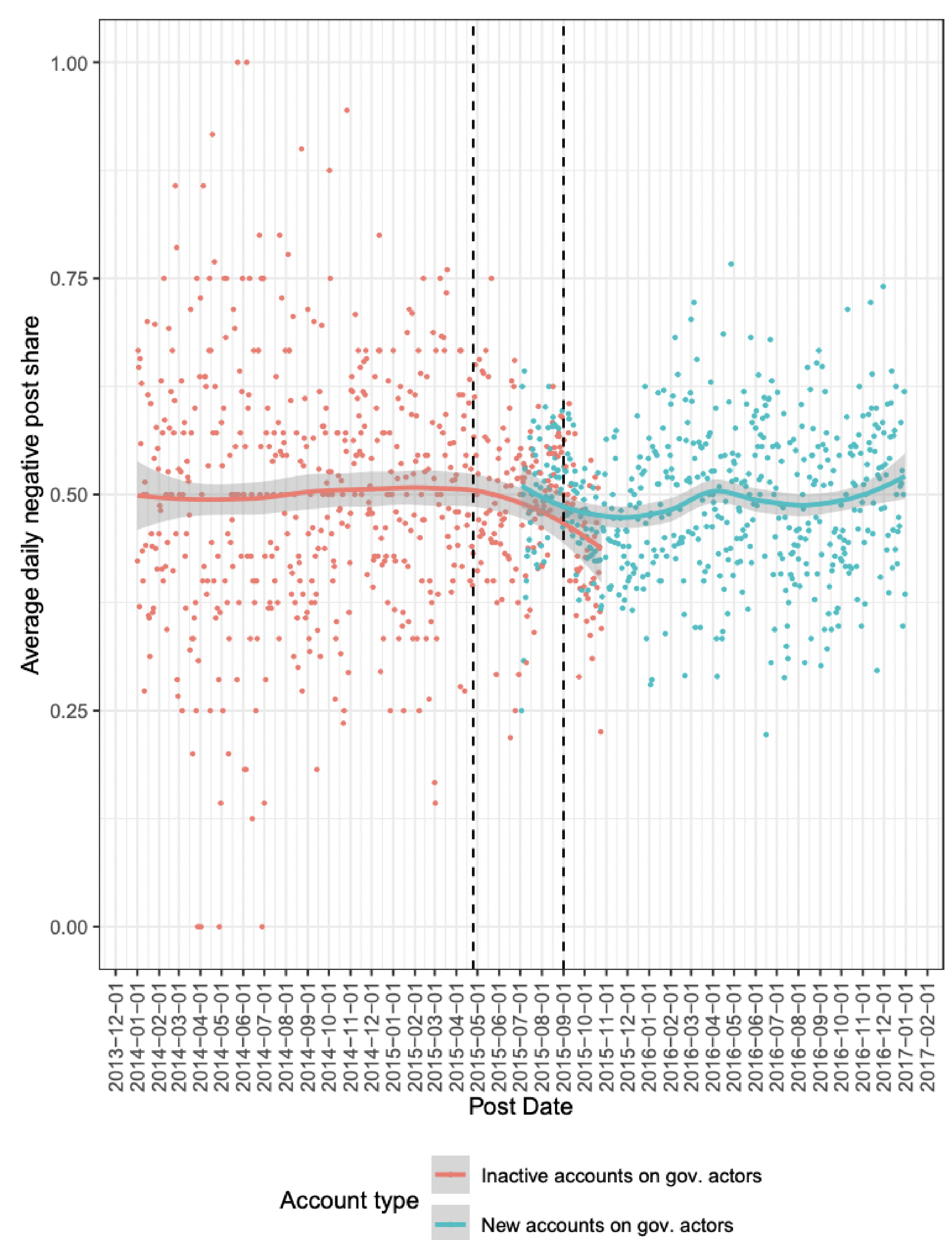

Figure 1:Inactive vs. new accounts: sentiment on government actors only.

Acknowledgements

Additional Information

- Click here to read the full report
- Email us at serkant.adiguzel@sabanciuniv.edu
- Find us online at devlab@penn