

Social Media in Kenyan Journalism: Benefits, Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: *Advances in technology have contributed a lot to the growth of journalism worldwide. Sourcing information and disseminating information has been made easy by the internet. Social media especially has made it possible for journalists and others to publish, share and discuss news events. This paper discusses social media use in Kenya with regard to its forms, benefits, opportunities it provides and challenges faced by media users especially in the Kenyan journalism sector.*

I. Introduction

Over the last five years, social media has gained popularity all over the world. Almost everyone uses Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, You Tube and other forms of social media both for social and professional purposes. Although not everyone has gotten on board with the social media giant, it has shaped how people around the world communicate with one another. Information that was once considered off limits and inaccessible by an “average” person is now disseminated within shortest period possible. Because Twitter, You Tube and Facebook are easily accessible to millions of people globally, they are effective platform to disseminate headline news to mass audience/viewers (Baecker, 2011).

For a long time, Kenyans have relied on their country’s well-developed mainstream media for information. Recently however, more and more Kenyans have begun turning to social media for quick and frequently updated news. As such, journalists and professional media houses have embraced the use of social media for news sourcing and dissemination of information in order to remain relevant. Social media has various advantages including speed of accessing and disseminating information, ease of updating unfolding stories, providing a forum for discussions, among others. Amid these benefits, there are various challenges that journalists and other social media users face.

II. Forms Of Social Media

The term Social Media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue. Social media takes on many different forms including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, wikis, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking. With the world in the midst of a social media revolution, it is more than obvious that social media like Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, MySpace, Skype etc., are used extensively for the purpose of communication. This form of communication can be with a person or a group of persons (Eberhardt, 2007). Below is a brief discussion of some social media forms:

Facebook

Facebook sprung from its roots as a school-based social network to become the most popular social networking site in the world with more than 200 million members. In the beginning of 2009, Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, equated Facebook to a nation; he said Facebook would be the eighth largest country in the world. As of 2010, it would stand as the third largest country in the world, right behind China and India and ahead of the United States with a “population” of 700,000,000 users. A few keys to Facebook’s success are: its ability to appeal to both people and businesses; the success of Facebook’s developers’ network, which has turned Facebook into a thriving platform; and Facebook Connect’s ability to reach out to the rest of the web and provide a single login that works across multiple sites. According to socialbakers.com, there are over 1.58 million Facebook users in Kenya, ranking it 69th in the Facebook statistics by country. The largest age group is currently 18 -24 with total of 569 527 users, followed by people of the age 25 – 34 (Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009).

Flickr

Flickr was founded by two entrepreneurs and purchased by Yahoo in 2005. Flickr is the world’s leading photo sharing and hosting site. Its members have uploaded more than 3 billion photos since its inception. With Flickr, journalists and bloggers can take advantage of fair use, which allows them to use

any web content as long as they credit the original creator. Fair use would apply in Journalism and Social Media to making journalistic commentary on a particular image. However, it does not refer to the use of images for decorating purposes (Tomno, 2012).

LinkedIn

According to Baecker (2011), LinkedIn is a social networking website for people in professional occupations, founded in December 2002, and launched in May 2005. It is mainly used for professional networking and as of June 2012, LinkedIn reported more than 175 million registered users in nearly 200 countries.

YouTube

YouTube is a video sharing website created by three former PayPal employees in February 2005. Users can upload, view and share video with this medium (Tomno, 2012).

Twitter

Micro-blogging allows people to publish short messages to other subscribers of a specific web service. The most famous micro-blogging service is Twitter. There were over 500 million Twitter users by March 2012. Twitter is an online social networking and micro-blogging service that enables users to send and read text-based messages containing up to 140 characters. Twitter has become one of the top 10 most visited websites in the world, (Schaefer, 2012).

Blogs

One of the easiest ways that journalists can pass information and express themselves is to have a personal blog. Journalists also have blogs which they use to dialogue and get feedback. Journalists can also use blogs to write about something that they are passionate about. The integral element of a blog is dialogue and actively encourages feedback and comments. Journalistic blogs tend to have a personal flavor and informal writing style where someone can express their own opinions (Schaefer, 2012).

Google+

Google+ aims to make sharing on the web more like sharing in real life and currently has more than 170 million members (Schaefer, 2012).

Pinterest

Pinterest is the latest on the social media block. Pinterest has over 10 million members (Schaefer, 2012).

III. Use and benefits of social media in Kenya

At first glance, Kenya has one of the most sophisticated media sectors in Africa. Kenyan media companies, with long and distinguished histories of providing news, have developed into commercially successful companies. Kenya is one of the few African countries where market research and audience statistics are available and used with effect by the media. However, Kenya is also troubled by the 2007/2008 political turmoil that hampered the work of independent media and threatened to overturn the media development achieved over decades. Corruption and economic problems plague the practice of journalism. Furthermore, the robust media scene that one finds in urban areas lies in stark contrast to rural areas, where state radio and one or two other stations are likely to be available to residents there. Fortunately, dramatic changes for the better are afoot for freedom of expression and a free press now that the new Kenyan constitution, enacted in 2010, is in place.

The constitution of Kenya (2010) provides for greater freedoms, including for the media and the person, as well as transparent, responsible, and accountable political and economic governance. Moreover, the constitution created and devolved power to 47 counties. This is intended to decentralize power and enhance grassroots economic development, so that there will be more investment by the media in catering for the needs of county populations, who have long complained that most existing media organizations concentrate on urban areas, particularly the capital, Nairobi (Constitution of Kenya, 2010). These qualities are what make social media viable and effective means to disperse news on a national and global scale (Baecker 2011).

The majority of media users in Kenya are youth, although it is also widely used by older age groups. In a survey conducted in some universities in 2012, it emerged that the majority of the students use Twitter and Facebook as a primary means of communication and accessing information. The students interviewed gave examples of how they are able to get breaking news through social media instead of the main news organizations. The Kenyan government is also encouraging Kenyan youth to be trained in information and communication technology. Former President Mwai Kibaki directed the Ministry of Information to develop

programs for the training and development of youth nationwide, to catch the first generation of truly digital Kenyans (CCK, 2012).

At the beginning, lack of internet reliability proved to be a critical challenge to media convergence and use of social media in Kenya. Kenya had been relying on very small aperture technology to boost the speed of its internet connectivity. However, the construction of an undersea fiber-optic cable has increased access to broadband in Kenya. This has brought phenomenal growth in social media usage in Kenya (Ministry of Information and Communication, 2006).

As a result, the journalism industry in Kenya has been transformed by the emergence of numerous Internet-enabled technologies such as social media for news-gathering and dissemination news outlets. Websites, blogs, instant messaging systems, e-mail, social networking sites and other Internet-based communication systems have made it much easier for journalists to rapidly connect, exchange information, and collaborate with each other. Education in all levels is continually transformed to innovations in the communication platform. Websites now serve as a primary source of dispersing news information and analysis for the masses. In addition to social media tools, blogs are turning individuals into news contributors. For example, blogs make it possible for everyone with basic computer skills to access internet easily, fast and publish onto the web. Blogging has also impacted journalism in that regular citizens are increasingly performing 'random acts of journalism', having witnessed an event and writing about it on a blog (Stassen, 2010).

Kenya is embracing social media as a tool to disseminate information thus everyone has the potential to be watchdog, citizen journalist and photo journalist and constantly survey the world around them and share what they source online. This acceleration of communication and awareness has serious implications for crisis communications. It is changing the landscape in which crisis communicators operate (Tremblay, 2010). Social media in Kenya has become a great resource in times of crisis. It provides tools for communities to crowd source real time information using text messages, emails and social networks. For example, Kenyan bloggers, OryOkolloh, Erik Hersman, Juliana Rotich and David Kobia, developed a journalistic platform that would allow the public to share information using the available communication means (social media). The crowd-sourcing platform was called 'Ushahidi', which means 'testimony' in Kiswahili; it was a way for the public to share their views regarding general post-election violence of 2007/2008. Ushahidi was used to get citizens' testimonies using social media for example, Twitter, Facebook and blogs. At that point, Kenya's online community collaborated and shared content, depending on their location.

Groups organizing through online platforms have done so without fear of being subverted and prosecuted by state security apparatus and authorities. They have also been able to mobilize without traditional modes of support, including the conventional media. For instance, Bunge la Mwananchi Movement ("People's Parliament") utilizes three Facebook pages to mobilize citizens' opinions on governance and has a following of over 50,000 people.

The emerging trends of social media have greatly impacted the dissemination of information developed. Kenyan media have not been left behind in technological convergence. Kenyan televisions are highly relying on social media information to disseminate and deliver news/advertisements to the consumers. The modern Kenyan consumer has access to news and information right at their doorstep. New technologies have encouraged the development of user-generated journalism (erroneously called citizen journalism). Audiences proactively collect and share emerging information with media houses. Media have become receivers of content from the public, a shift from its previous role as disseminators of news and information. Audiences are invading an arena that has been the preserve of journalists. What's more, people have realized the importance of adopting an intelligent curiosity mindset, where they challenge what is presented before them, all these developments signal, is a new era of media consumers and creators, that are heavily involved in the process of information gathering and sharing. Over the past few years social media has emerged as a very powerful frontier for mass communication compared to other online platforms. This is especially in regard to active use of social media (Tomno, 2012).

Social networking web sites have succeeded in attracting investors, advertisers, journalists and many more participants. It was not long ago that social media made big news when it overtook email in terms of online activity. These activities are expressed by (#) tag in order to feature online as trending activity.

Politicians in Kenya have not been left behind either, realizing the value of social media; many candidates in the country's 2013 general elections had an official page on Twitter and/or Facebook (Baecker, 2011). This helped them in selling their agenda and mobilizing many voters' support, especially that of the youth.

Moreover, the advent of media convergence like use of mobile phones to access the internet has further made it easier for Kenyans to use social media. Mobile telephone has played a significant role in digital mobilization in Kenya. Kenyans are fast warming to the idea of using the internet and mobile telephone to mobilize and participate in civil and political activism. The use of mobile telephone, and especially Short

Message Service (SMS), is undoubtedly considered one of the most efficacious in civil and political activism. Although SMS has acquired a somewhat bad political reputation because of what is now referred to as viral politics, it remains one of the most potent forces for social good. The recent rise of mobile money transfer services has further raised the profile of mobile telephone as a social change agent in Kenya. Nowadays it is common to receive messages from the government and other groups seeking support for various causes in the social networks. In the constitutional referendum of August 2010, mobile telephone and the social media were used to drum up support for or against the constitution. The Interim Independent Electoral Commission of Kenya subsequently used mobile telephone to encourage people to vote in the plebiscite (Ministry of Information, 2012).

IV. Challenges

Granted, social media provides a platform for accessing information about anything one can think of. The challenge is however, how to get compelling stories from noise as there are millions of tweets, stories, pictures, links, name them, posted on the internet every second. Although new technologies have effected changes on the amount of information available and the rate of reception, it is not clear whether these have had any significant effect on the quality of information and news. In fact, there are claims that rising competition and the obsession to provide exclusive news fast using social media may have negatively affected the quality, reliability, and validity of information (The Ministry of Information, 2012). This is especially true of the breaking news facility operated by media groups like the Nation Media Group and the Standard Media Group, which charge consumers about KSh10 (US\$ 0.10) per mobile phone text. Although immediacy is important particularly among audiences who want to know what is going on around the country, sometimes the media houses do not have the time, capacity, or other resources to authenticate the information sent out as breaking news. This means the new technologies may in fact contribute to unreliable and raw information that may affect the credibility of established or conventional news media organizations to provide reliable news. The bigger established media houses in Kenya have websites. One of the most active is the Nation online, which is updated throughout the day. This is largely because the Nation Media Group (the biggest media organization in East and Central Africa by revenue) has resources to employ a dedicated team, (The Ministry of Information, 2012).

While some journalists, especially those from big media houses, report objectively, many journalists do not crosscheck facts from their sources. "We have seen and read many stories that lack facts, are not balanced, and lack necessary background. This may be because of laziness or poor facilitation for reporters to do their work properly" (Baecker, (2011).

Much as the Kenyan constitution provides for freedom of expression and other media friendly laws, the social media and digital framework policy and law is not yet adequate for digitized media. This is because the existing overall framework of policy and law was formulated for the analog era. The digital switch-over strategy faces numerous challenges. A lack of resources to build the digital infrastructure is one of them. Another daunting obstacle is consumer ignorance of what the switch means. Lastly, there are serious concerns as to whether the public can afford the end-user devices that they need for their analog devices or the digital receivers (Ministry of Information and Communication, 2006).

Baecker (2011) further adds that The Standard Media Group, Nation Media Group and other established media houses in Kenya, have official news websites where they update news once a day. What is noteworthy is that more often than not the information contained on the websites is exactly the same as that provided in social media sites. Accordingly, the quality of the information published online is either not or is trustworthy.

The other key disadvantage of social technology especially social networking is that most people do not know how to network effectively and safely. The usual forms of censorship: violence, prison, harassment and raids on editorial offices are equally damaging to professional journalists as well. Assaults on online journalists and social media activists are direct attacks on all media. Issues of cyber terrorism, cybercrime, cyber tracking and spam are currently on rise, some individuals are always sharing repeated comments promoting useless products or unrelated comments to the conversation e.g. the hate speeches which were seen as threats during the last general election in Kenya (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). Spammers and cybercrimes can make news broadcasting a problem in social networking especially for the new users or people who depend on social media information and thus may negate them from participating in social media networking (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008).

Others include invasion of privacy by law enforcement and governmental use of this information, including the gathering of so-called social media intelligence through data mining techniques. Additional privacy concerns regarding the impact of social media monitoring by employers whose policies include prohibitions against workers' postings on social networking sites.

For all of its advantages, the incredibly accessible and rapid nature of social media, particularly via mobile technology, has its disadvantages. For one, it can facilitate or exacerbate crises by spreading negative

information or misinformation at an incredible speed. "Sometimes the internet merely acts as an agent that accelerates the crises news cycle and breaks geographic boundaries" (Baum&Groeling, 2008).

Social media may also trigger crises in the form of rumors, hacking, shadow or copy-cat websites, web security breaks, and all forms of cyber-terrorism (Baum&Groeling, 2008). For instance, in 1994 Intel had to replace thousands of Pentium chips when a math professor discovered a flaw and posted it on the internet. Similarly, bicycle-lock Company Kryptonite lost \$10 million when a blogger posted that its locks could be opened by a ball point pen and the rumor spread (Baum &Groeling, 2008).It is now acknowledged that the masterminds of the 2007/2008 post-election violence in Kenya used mobile telephone services specifically social media to reach out to their supporters to engage in violence.

Some users of social media are very insensitive. They quickly post information on social media when tragedy happen, naming names, forgetting that victims of this tragedies have friends and family who might be affected by such insensitive behavior. When there was a tragic plane crash in 2012, involving a Kenyan Minister for Internal Security and his assistant, their families learnt of the painful news through the social media before government official could get to them.

Social media can slow down work because a journalist can spend long hours using social media at the expense of work, as Facebook and other social media platforms are very addictive. It can leave room for sabotage; forgetting to log out of your Facebook page could spell disaster, as people can easily post things that are not true or use your name for their own selfish interests. There are very few rules to govern social media. In-house guidelines have been set out by some media houses to guard their reputations; some journalists have been dismissed for writing personal opinions on social media. A journalist can easily publish incorrect information without clarification. Additionally, there is little regulation in the use of social media, and it can be a platform for hate speech. In some countries, blogs have been shut down by the government.

Social media can encourage laziness and ignorance as some journalists do not read anymore, and rely on information they get from the social media.It also compromises the quality of the journalists that we have, since it is now easier for anyone to become a journalist. It can compromise ethics, and also can be an unreliable source of information.

The fact that it has become easy to store information on servers, which are prone to hacking, is a major threat to investigative journalism in Kenya as indeed it is elsewhere.. As media companies increasingly rely on servers to store materials, a common threat especially for media houses conducting investigative journalism is sabotage or threat to the work of investigative journalists. By the same token, workers can damage computer and other technologies upon which media rely for communication, storage, and retrieval of material. For example, the unreliability of internet connections in Kenya causes frequent system breakdowns. Some system administrators and even journalists are also known to work as spies and moles for particular individuals, so they can interfere with investigative and other reports. This is evidenced by, for example, the government's attack on the Standard Media Group in March 2006, when state agents carted away their computers which they claimed contained material "harmful to state security." It is an insider who tipped the government (Ngugi, 2011).

V. Conclusion

While there are many advantages of using social media is a journalistic tool to access and disseminate information, there are equally many challenges associated with it. A major issue of concern is with regard to journalistic standard; that is, being that social media is prone to unsubstantiated information, and consumers can add information at will to update articles; is information on social media still credible, accurate and balanced? This is a question that will always be raised as long as journalists, bloggers and people at large continue using the social media. These challenges notwithstanding, social media remains a key asset in sourcing and disseminating information both in Kenya and worldwide.

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