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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM IN KENYA

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Abstract

Kenya is relying heavily on digital media technologies for disseminating information in sport, entertainment, education, marketing advancement, chatting and commentary. Kenyans have also taken full advantage of enhanced communicative capabilities of new modern technologies such as social media networking and applications on technological foundations that allow creation and communicative exchange of user-generated content. Social media has changed the way news is generated and accessed. They influence media in at least three dimensions; as a tool for journalists to create content, as a tool to distribute and impart information and as a tool to seek, receive and access information. Despite this advancement, questions have been raised on the quality of information shared on the social media. Many journalists have altered the ways in which they report and disseminate news updates thus compromising journalistic ethics. This study was carried out in Nairobi Kenya to explore how social media impacts professionalism in gathering and disseminating information. It examined the quality and quantity of information shared on social media, investigated effectiveness of social media technologies when disseminating news and established benefits and challenges facing use of social media technology in Kenya. The researchers employed a qualitative research design to carry out research. A sample of 20 participants was selected conveniently out of a target of 200. 4 were sampled from Citizen Journalists, 10 were sampled from professional journalists, another 4 sampled from social media news consumers and 2 were sampled from communication commission of Kenya. The study employed in-depth interviews of 20 participants to generate data. Interviews were conducted online on the participant's accounts. Data was analyzed thematically through coding. Interpretation of codes included comparing theme frequencies, identifying theme co-occurrences and identifying relationship between different themes. The findings show that though social media plays a significant role in accessing and generating information, a lot of checks and balances have to be put in place to ensure information is of quality and credible. The findings of the study will be useful to the social professional media fraternity and government to develop structures that will enhance quality news dissemination and credible information to the audience.

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Introduction

The new constitution of Kenya, promulgated in August 2010, is considered a major positive development in ensuring the free flow of information. It provides for freedom of media as a right and fundamental freedom. Section 34 guarantees the independence of electronic, print, and all other types of media but does not allow expression of incitement to violence, hate speech, or advocacy of hatred. The government has also pledged to enhance Kenya's technological infrastructure. It is working on "digital villages" to enable people even in remote parts of the country to access broadband internet, it has

invested in the roll-out of fiber-optic cable throughout the country. The process started in 2009 when the cable connecting the country to the rest of the world reached the coastal city of Mombasa, promising faster internet connection at reduced costs of electronic communication either via the voice or internet, with this modern technologies advancement. Consequently, professional journalists are increasingly relying heavily on social media as a flat form for searching, gathering and disseminating information in sport, entertainment, education, marketing, chatting and commentary (Communications Commission of Kenya (CCK), 2012).

Intense competition by mobile service providers in Kenya for instance Safaricom, Airtel, Orange, and Yu has meant cheaper and greater access to internet broadband further promoting usage of digital and social media technologies in Kenya. The development of digital and online news outlets by major media houses in Kenya namely; Nation media group, the Standard media group and Royal Media services means that Kenyans are increasingly able to access breaking news via the social media technologies. In addition, the availability of user-controlled facilities such as Facebook and Twitter combined with news websites has increased the amount of information and the number of digital platforms accessible to professional journalists. Community media in Kenya have not been left behind. They often use social media technologies in broadcasts trending breaking news to the youths and urban generation.

Availability of digital and social media networking technologies have changed and improved journalists' working habits. People working in newsrooms are now expected to be multi skilled, whereas previously photographers accompanied reporters to the field, now reporters carry digital cameras and take their own pictures, particularly if the assignments are in remote areas. The Kenyan media ecosystem does not escape the dark side of the internet. In the social media journalism, the virtues associated with ethics-accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness of social media sourced information is barely respected, largely because there is no effective means of controlled media professionalism (CCK, 2012).

Technology has contributed to the worst but also to the best of political and societal activism. Many people refer to the post-election violence of December 2007 and January 2008 as good examples of what technology can do. It is now acknowledged that the masterminds of the post-election violence used social media and more specifically Short Message Service (SMS) to engage their supporters in violence. The 2010 referendum on the constitution was another good example of how mobile telephone and especially social media can be used to mobilize people, supporters and critics of the constitution regularly used Facebook and twitter to reach out to their fellow countrymen (Ministry of Information and Communication, 2006).

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Over the past few years, digital media technologies have emerged as a very powerful frontier for mass communication especially by citizen journalists: Facebook, Twitter, google and other online media tools are ushering the new age information sourcing and updating in recruiting, marketing, distribution, collaboration, reporting and funding opportunities. Unlike traditional media which has been one-sided, social media is more interactive and provides the opportunity to receive instant feedback on any messages put across to the audience. To a great extent, people experience online news, especially shared on social sites by the professional journalism sectors; people swap links in emails, post news stories on their social networking website feeds, highlight news stories in their tweets, and converse on the meaning of events in discussion threads and trends. Social media is integral part of modern journalism and communication in Kenya, this is because it's the easiest way to source, gather and disseminate information to the audience. However, many journalists have altered the ways in which they report and disseminate updates therefore compromising journalistic ethics; others have lost the skill of researching stories due to the ease of acquiring information on the social media. Some bloggers have also found themselves in court because of the sentiments and statements published on their blogs. Moreover Little research has been done specifically on credibility and quality of services provided by the professional journalists in Kenya on the information sourced from the social networks, ethics-accuracy, honesty, truth, impartiality, fairness, balance, and respect for autonomy of ordinary people-are barely respected, largely because there is no effective way of policing this, and there are no legal penalties or proper guidelines or scrutiny of information before publicizing it to the audience. This leads to the spread of dubious information contents such as trivialization, sensationalism, obscenity, vulgarity and racism which is disseminated fast via social media flat form. Therefore, the study explored how social media impacts on the quality of information disseminated by the professional journalists in Kenya.

2.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

We are living in the Digital Age, a time that, almost everyone can practice democratic culture of disseminating information in society within a flash of time. The Internet brings along a new notion of media: Social media and social networking as

ever means of communicating and sharing of ideas, many of which we could not have imagined few years ago. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube make it easier in transmission of information, impart and receive news and comment on and discuss ideas and developments. Users of new technologies already have widened the scope of professional journalism and added new terms, including blogging and citizen journalism, to the media landscape (Newman, 2011).

This phenomenon is more rampant in developed countries, such as the United States, Germany, France and the United Kingdom, where information is used as a basic resource. Unlike these developed countries, nations such as those in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia are somehow lagging behind in social media technology development. The world's core countries, which contain about five percent of the world's population, make up ninety percent of the social media users (Marston 2006). An important aspect of media globalization is the 'digital divide' which occurs between the developed and developing countries. The 'digital divide' is the "inequality of access to telecommunications and information technology, particularly the Internet" (Newman, 2011).

The digital divide notwithstanding, a large number of people living in developing countries have embraced the use of social media. According to the article "The Emerging Role of Social Media in Political and Regime Change" by Rita Safranek, The Middle East and North Africa region has one of the large populations using social media. 17 million are Facebook users, 25,000 have Twitter accounts and 40,000 active blogs. According to the Arab Advisors Group, the emergence of social media has created a nation of media content creators for example, social media citizen journalists have impacted professional journalists in their day to day working environment in sourcing, gathering and disseminating trending information to the news consumers (Cited in Bardoel & Deuze, 2001).

In Kenya, the use of social media to disseminate news has been taken up by both professional journalists and citizens who use it for other additional purposes like activism. One of the best-known digital activist groups is Ushahidi (Kiswahili for "testimony"). Ushahidi software was used to map trouble-spots during the post-election violence with the aid of social media networking. It was also used to post messages and pictures sent in by ordinary people using their mobile phones to track unfolding events and warn people of trouble-spots (Zuckerman, 2009).

Another great example of the empowering effect of technology is Mzalendo. Mzalendo (Kiswahili for "patriot"), a Kenya Parliament Watchdog, has been used particularly during election periods to let citizens know about the performance of their representatives.

The legal and regulatory framework of Kenyan broadcasting encourages diversity of news and information. The aim of the liberalization of the airwaves was to encourage more players and to bring on board private media outlets such as developing social media. However, the current players do not exhibit diversity in ownership and content. The national ICT policy of 2006 committed the government to support and encourage pluralism and diversity of media technologies in Kenya which led to a proliferation of new channels. However it did not do much for content diversity, because of the level of media concentration, framework, ownership and registration. Concentration of media ownership has increased in the last five years in Kenya. For example in April 2012, the Nation Media Group added another media outfit, QTV, to its portfolio. Most of the mergers and consolidations of ownership in Kenya have been detrimental to pluralism and diversity and thus people look more to social media for alternative reporting.

Although not everyone has gotten on board with the social media hype, 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 the shortest period possible. Since Twitter, You Tube and Facebook are easily accessible to millions of people globally; they are effective platforms to disseminate headline news to mass audience/viewers (Baecker, 2011).

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.

The use of social media is not without challenges. 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, p.86). Social networking web sites have experienced explosive growth over the past few years. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2009), 46 percent of online American older used a social networking site in 2009. When the demographics are narrowed down to college students, 89 percent of the 960

college students who participated in a survey conducted by the College Board in the fall of 2009 were using at least one social networking site (Walton, 2011).

Additionally in Kenya, 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).

3.0 AIM OF STUDY

The overall objective of this study was to explore the impact of social media as a communication tool in Kenya. To achieve this objective, the following questions were posed:

- What is the quality and quantity of information shared on social media?
- How effective is the use of social media technologies in disseminating news?
- What are benefits and challenges of using the social media technology in Kenya?

4.0 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The research study was conducted in Nairobi, Kenya. It determined how individuals acquire and share news through social media platforms; it also examined how uses of social media site have impacted dissemination of news in Kenya. The researchers involved social media users and professional journalists within Nairobi as participants. The communication commission of Kenya was involved in tackling questions concerning media policies and framework in Kenya

5.0 METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed qualitative research design. Structured Interview was used to collect data. In this study, the population was social media users within Nairobi Kenya. The study targeted professional journalists, citizen journalists, Communication Commission of Kenya officials and social media consumers within Nairobi City who were estimated to be 2.7 million according to Ipsos record, 2010. The study targeted 200 of the mentioned groups who operate within the Nairobi Central Business Division. The researcher narrowed this population down to a sample of 20 participants who were selected using convenient sampling that is, participation was voluntary.

Sample Profile

The study employed in-depth interviews of 20 participants- 4 sampled from Citizen Journalists, 10 sampled from professional journalists, 4 sampled from social media news consumers and 2 sampled from Communication Commission of Kenya.

Interviews were conducted within 45 minutes time length for three days as they were conducted online and in person in cases of social media users.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed thematically which according to Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) involves the following steps; transcribing, re-familiarizing with the data, first phase coding, second phase coding, third phase coding and producing a report. Coding and encoding prior to interpretation was done. Interpretation of codes included comparing theme frequencies, identifying theme co-occurrences and identifying relationship between different themes.

6.0 FINDINGS

Demographics

Out of the 20 participants interviewed, 4 were citizen journalists, 10 were professional journalists, 4 were the social media consumers and 2 were CCK officials.

The majority of the participants interviewed were male while the minorities were females. Males dominated with 60% while females were 40%.

Majority respondents were in age bracket 18-35 year thus this finding denotes that it is mostly the youth who have embraced digital technology and frequently use social media technology as a tool for disseminating information.

Social media news consumption

All the respondents who were interviewed had consumed social media news in one way or the other, in their day to day activities. This is what some of them said:

I use social media news daily. This is because it's very significant during the news bulleting time; social media news is informative, entertaining, educative and specific (Interviewee 1).

Social media news is a primary source of news update, trending information and people's views and opinions (Interviewee 2).

The Journalists mentioned social media tools that they were using; they listed Whats app, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Here is a sample:

I use social media for instance Facebook to mobilize and conduct mass communication especially during political arenas and for online transactions. Facebook and OLX have enabled me to conduct E-business for instance when selling and advertising my products (Interviewee 5).

Respondents confirmed that they depended on social media news daily due to its speed and effectiveness to disseminate information. They said that social media eases disseminating news by the process of re-sharing and retweeting;

I use social media to disseminate news every day for example; short messages, picture uploading and videos are key means of social media communication in Whats app media. Social network such as Facebook and tweeter are fast thus delivers news updates within flash of time. Facebook and twitter have more followers compared to other social networks since it has the ability to share and re-share news daily as it comes in (Interviewee 9).

I embrace using social media as a tool for news dissemination because it has instantaneous speed, convenient and easy to use. It allows identifying and approaching issues that would otherwise be difficult to tackle using mainstream media (Interviewee 5).

Social media in terms of news disseminating speed

Majority of the respondents said that social media is a rapid tool for disseminating news and it's easily accessed by social media consumers. Here is a sample of what they said;

I often use social media to disseminate online news as a journalist because it is very fast in all activities. I.e. researching, gathering, editing and sharing (Interviewee 6).

As much as social media is fast, I opt not to depend on news from it because it is not trustworthy as compared to mainstream media which allows for more interrogative and informative information (Interviewee 8).

Social media performance in term of effectiveness and reliability

Respondents argued that the use of the Internet and social networks is dominating among the news consumers in Kenya. They said that social media networks have caught on with a speed that has not allowed alignment in quality and values of news disseminated. Below is a sample:

As a journalist, I am delighted to use social media since it is rapid in news gathering and transmission countrywide. It's therefore effective and reliable (Interviewee 1).

I have severally consumed social media news but sometimes such news is full of propogandas and spam and thereby I prefer to counter confirm trending information from the mainstream news (Interviewee 20)

Credibility, accuracy and quality of social information are sometimes questioned when using social media networks. So I think it is not very reliable (Interviewee 17).

Most respondents admitted that they had been using social networks for both informative purposes as well as entertainment purposes. They also seem to prefer social networks over traditional media because of its speed of dissemination;

I prefer to use social media news over mainstream news because it's fast and entertaining, it concentrates more on sporting and celebrities than tradition media (Interviewee 10).

Professional journalist respondents argued that, citizen journalists should ensure credibility and accuracy of information, and should ensure believable news is disseminated prior to news sharing;

As a professional journalist, I rarely rely on user generated content during my day to day activities since the news are not credible (Interviewee 9).

Respondents said that, availability of social media technologies has significantly aided their work. The fact that journalists can now use facilities such as mobile phones and the internet to communicate ideas and disseminate different products is a boon to media and journalism, given the intense competition and rising audience expectations. Journalists can easily access research material, information and sources. Here is what one of them said;

I have been benefiting from the internet connection since the introduction of the fiber optical cables and mobile internet in Kenya; this technology is reliable, fast and affordable when disseminating information especially via social networking (Interviewee 11).

According to journalist's views, it can be difficult to verify and identity sources of information posted on social networks. Respondent argued that, sources should be vetted and screened properly before disseminating the posts to the mainstream media. Responder's said that, most social media sites offer a way to send a message directly to a user without authenticating the sense of information. Fake accounts are rampant and generated daily on the social media world and can appear online within minutes;

I usually use social media daily though finding the author or source of information is difficult (Interviewee 16).

Interviewees said that the growth and competition of the mobile and internet industries have increased. They stated that, there are four mobile phone service providers in Kenya, namely, Safaricom, Airtel, Orange, and Yu who highly compete to get more customers; they argued that mobile phone users are highly benefiting from dropping mobile and service prices especially in broadband use. The increase in the number of digital services are as a result of developments in internet infrastructure, and this has of course led to an increase in internet penetration and digital services in the country such as social media.

Interviewees said that, the cost of data is affordable, such that people can afford to access the internet services including social media by use of mobile phones;

I have been using the mobile phone bundle services as a source of cheap broadband network. This has aided me to log in to social networking such as facebook and twitter everywhere (Interviewee 13).

I am a middle income earner yet I have been enjoying cheap services offered by the mobile services providers such as social networking, blogging and sharing pictures (Interviewee 14).

Significance of social media in Kenya.

Respondents said that social media is a pillar to modern technology and thus is essential in the media sector especially for disseminating news. Most respondents said that, sharing news on the social media is not only fast and effective but that social media is a mirror that reflects public opinion with transparency that motivates people to share their views over

and over again. It is also easier to provide background information of certain content in depth, better assessing what the trends are in terms of what people are feeling and the state of debates.

Social media creates the idea and gives freedom of practicing journalism. Journalists bring feelings of community as people feel valued and listened to through updating occurrences of new events on social media flat form (Interviewee 7).

As a matter of fact Social media is effective, time saving, consistent, brief, up to date and convenient when disseminating information. I also like it because people can give their honest opinion about news items posted without fear of persecution (Interviewee 15).

Challenges of using social media in Kenya

Interviewees said that hacking is a major threat to social media in Kenya. As media companies increasingly rely on servers to store materials and online facilities to send and receive stories, pictures, and audiovisual material, this has become an ever too common threat especially for media houses conducting investigative journalism. For instance, a respondent said;

I have been using digital technologies for more than 8 years now but challenges like hacking, hate speech, online harassment, cyber tracking and cyber terrorism are main problems (Interviewee 16).

Respondents said that Issues of cyber terrorism, cybercrime, cyber tracking and spam are currently on rise, some individuals are always sharing repeated comments promoting useless contents or unrelated comments to the conversation. For instance, some of them said;

There is a lot of hate speech on social media that incite people to violence. For example, incitement on social media played a great role in perpetuating the 2007/2008 general election violence in Kenya (Interviewee 17).

Increased use of mobile services is degrading the credibility and quality of information due to commercialized activities and technology-driven environment. In other words, I ought to think about the negative consequences of quantity information disseminated to the consumers rather than the quality (Interviewee 6).

7.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The use of digital media and social networks is increasing rapidly worldwide and in Kenya. It comes with a lot of advantages including faster and cheaper means of accessing and disseminating information. Social media websites allow individuals to easily take part in discussing issues with their friends, family, and larger networks. With the help of social media tools, the internet is fast changing the way people consume their news. The study determined that individuals are primarily motivated to share news stories with their social networks to maintain relationships either in trending news updates, sporting or advertisements. Those who share news articles through social media enjoy doing so to discuss current events and trending topics with people in their social networks. In particular, young adults depend on their network to get updates on the news articles.

Unfortunately, there is a lot inaccurate communication shared on social media sites thus impacting negatively to journalistic standards of accuracy, credibility, objectivity and fairness. Journalists themselves expressed concern that being involved with social media tools perhaps diminishes their reputation as “serious” professionals. However, users have an option to “unfollow” articles with useless content. There is also the concern that increased use of social media could lead to fragmentation and trivialization of mainstream news as news stories if they have to remain relevant and attract audiences. This is because news reported in social media is written in a sensational manner thus draws attention of many audiences and therefore it is difficult for traditional media to compete with this. These concerns therefore call for the social and professional media fraternity to develop structures that will enhance quality news dissemination and credible information to the audience. The government of Kenya also needs to come up with clear policies and laws that are going to guide usage of social media in disseminating information such that those who abuse the social media can be held accountable.

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