

Social Media and Post-Election Crisis in Kenya

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Abstract

This article analyzes the role of the media during the two months of post election crisis in 2008 in Kenya. We discuss how people exchanged information during and after the media ban, and analyze online discussions and media coverage. Particular emphasis is given to the role of the “social media” such as web 2.0 communication tools and services, which enable citizens to interact or share contents online. Our analysis shows that during the crisis the “social media” functioned as an alternative medium for “citizen communication” or “participatory journalism”. This experience has important implications for the process of democratization in Kenya.

Keywords: Kenya, social media, weblogs, participatory journalism, citizen journalism

Introduction

On February 28th 2008, Kenya's president Mwai Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga signed a power-sharing agreement after two months of violence that followed the controversial presidential election results. The clashes left over 1000 people dead and 500,000 displaced (The Standard 2008). Both presidential parties claimed they had won the polls, but the final contested presidential results put Kibaki in the lead by 200,000 votes. Odinga said the process of releasing results was fraud and the Electoral Commission had "doctored the results" (The Standard 2007).

Shortly after Kibaki was proclaimed winner on December 30th, 2007, the Kenyan internal security minister John Michuki announced the ban of live broadcast. The ban had been ordered "in the interest of public safety and tranquillity" (The Standard 2007; AllAfrica.com 2007). Just before the proclamation of Kibaki, opposition leader Odinga announced his victory in a public briefing. Some media had already published the first results¹, so they replaced them with the new ones, and then, went into silence during the five-day ban. Although some foreign media continued to broadcast live, local media did not dare to resist the ban.

Given the news blackout, many Kenyans turned to other means of getting and relaying information. One such means was the use of short messages services (SMS) from mobile phones. People used mobile phones to communicate and circumvent the media blackout (Ramey 2008). SMS messages were used to share news and feelings, but the ability to send mass SMS had been disabled by the government to prevent people from sending what it deemed to be "provocative messages." The Ministry of Internal Security warned about circulating SMS that may cause public unrest. Phone cards were

also in short supply in many areas, which suggested unusual demand for mobile phone communication. Social media tools like wikis, blogs, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter and mashups were increasingly used to organize and share information about the crisis, violence, and raise funds. There were alert maps and SMS –services to inform about the critical spots of violence. Some discussion forums aimed to promote peace and Kenyan unity. There was the Kenya Elections –site in Flickr.com and relevant video files in YouTube.com.

Our interviews show that citizens approached the “social media” as a way to get involved, particularly after violence erupted.² One blogger observed, “This election my M.O. was that I was going to see things for myself and not rely on the traditional media. And so I went out to capture the pulse of the country.” (Thinkersroom blog 2008). Unsatisfied with their limited possibilities as media consumers, many Kenyans chose to take active roles as “citizen journalists” reporting the ongoing situation and expressing their thoughts online. Some of the highly-used Kenyan blogs include [Mashada.com](#), [Kwani.org?](#), [Thinkersroom.com](#), [Afromusing.com](#) and [Allafrica.com](#). Globally, many activists contributed their views in online public spheres such as [EthanZuckerman.com](#) and [Kenyanpundit.com](#), analyzed the situation, and criticised political leaders and mainstream journalism.

In this article, we argue that the “social media” generated an alternative public sphere, which widened the perspectives about the crisis, and enabled new kind of citizen participation in discussing the situation. The crisis also showed the significance of the “social media” as a horizontal form for information-sharing.

The Media was not Innocent

The fallout of the presidential election and the violence that followed the announcement of Kibaki's win over Odinga questioned the basis of Kenya's democracy. In contrast to institutions like parliament and the courts that have never enjoyed much public trust, the media has been trusted as a democratic institution (Musungu 2008; Maina 2006). A majority of people interviewed also seemed to trust the local media. Although the Kenyan media is relatively free compared to many African countries, the government has showed a tendency to controlling news organizations. During the last years, there have been numerous arrests and prosecutions of journalists, and the police shut down a newspaper (The Standard 2006). Many of the cases involved prosecution for publication of, what the government deemed, "alarmist information" (World Press Freedom Review 2006). Although there are signs of improvement such as the growth of the radio stations and increased freedom to air different views in broadcast media, the lack of proper legislation and regulation raises concerns.

The post-election situation raised discussions about the performance of the media. Many observers asked whether the media did a proper job as watchdog and unbiased observer, or instead, contributed to the crisis. According to Reporters without Borders (2008), the media failed to perform an adequate role by being too careful and self-censoring. Journalists had not pushed to find out the truth about the rigged results. Fears of making things worse obsessed journalists who, according to several reports and our interviews, were willing to act as peacemakers more than critical reporters. The Kenyan media was accused of pro-government bias during the election crisis (Miriri 2008), and some analysts partially blamed the media for the violence. Journalists gathered at a media

workshop in January 2008 agreed that the media failed short from during the crisis. Local radio stations propagated and spread ethnic hate which, arguably, incited violent acts (Musungu 2008; Otieno 2008).

Many Kenyan bloggers were critical of the role of the mainstream media. After the elections, several media reviewed that violence was due to “long-simmering ethnic tensions” (CNN.com 2008). However, many bloggers argued that the tensions had been consciously stoked by political parties, while the nation had been largely free of serious ethnic tension for most of its history (Zuckerman 2008). They also accused the national media of reducing the problem to simply a Kibaki-Raila game, while failing to tackle seriously the extra-judicial killings by police (Musungu 2008), and criticized the international media for showing Kenya as a desperate and violent country, and ignoring the voices of people who were not interested in violence (Wanjiku 2008).

The social media offered narratives by “citizen reporters” and digital activists that were more diverse than the views presented in the mainstream media, and represented grassroots reactions during the crisis. While the international media only scratched the surface of what was happening, and the traditional media partly resigned to censorship due to fears of repression, the social media acted offered swifter, more subjective, and more detailed coverage during a fast-moving and changing situation.

Social Media for Peace and for Trouble

Kenya’s post-election conflict offered fertile ground for citizen journalism. Daudi Were, the blogger behind Mentalacrobatics and co-founder of Kenyan Blogs Webring, went to

the streets with his camera, and documented the confrontations between police and demonstrators. Were writes, “On Thursday (January the 3th) I headed into town to get a feel of the mood on the ground before the ODM rally, banned by the government but which ODM insisted it would go ahead with anyway, at Uhuru Park was due to start. I took a matatu into town, jumped outat Railways and started walking towards the centre of town. I noticed all the newspapers had the same headline, Save our Beloved Country. The local media has been criticised in some quarters for not utilising its unique position to help the efforts against the violence, clearly the editors had decided to get proactive” (Mentalacrobatics blog 2008)

Kenyan bloggers had been critical on political issues before the crisis (Zuckerman 2006). Ory Okolloh, a young Kenyan lawyer and digital activist, states that her website Mzalendo (2008) “aims to open up Parliament and demonstrate that it is both possible and necessary for Kenyans to demand and expect more accountability from public institutions.” She takes records coming out of the Kenyan parliament, publishes them online, and encourages people to critically discuss what their MPs are doing for them. Her initiative is to challenge the information sharing of the parliament and the watchdog role of media institutions. Okolloh was also behind the idea of mapping violent incidents throughout the country during the crisis. Some other Kenyans picked up the idea and launched the Ushahidi –website. Ushahidi.com is a tool for people who had witnessed acts of violence in Kenya after the election to report them. The website shows the incidents on a map of the country, and the site also accepts SMS-delivered reports about ongoing events. The project is currently working with local NGOs to get information and

to verify each incident. (Ushahidi.com January 2008). This kind of mapping mashup could be further developed and used in similar situations anywhere.

The social media was not politically innocent. Although some blogs aimed to promote peace and justice, others were used as channels for biased information, tribal prejudices, and hate speech. The online sphere may foster the formation and strengthening of like-minded people, and add to the fragmentation of opinions and views rather than building compromises. Many bloggers took sides and the discussion could be ethnically tense. Similarly, while SMS has been a powerful tool for good during and after the elections, it was also used to spread rumors and messages laden with ethnic hatred. It was reported that SMS predicted attacks and called recipients to act on the basis of their ethnicity. (e.g. What an African Woman Thinks blog 2008). People also received anonymous calls or flyers threatening them. Mashada.com, a popular Kenyan website for chatting, blogging and discussing, was an important forum for many citizens, largely because it accepted SMS-delivered postings. However, as the discussions and debates became too tense, the moderators decided to shut down the forums. The bloggers reported the incident as “Kenyans First Digital Casualty” (White African weblog 2008).

Who is Blogging in Kenya?

Most Kenyans do not have access to social media. Only 3.2% of the population has Internet access, and cyber cafés are available mainly in urban areas. However, the number of digital activists is growing as the middle class population grows (Zuckerman 2008b). The world of citizens’ media is familiar to the educated and wealthy population

in the same way as in other societies. Thus, one could argue that given its demographics, while the social media represent elite's views, the majority has limited possibilities for participating in web-based discussions. Growing awareness of the new media, however, could enable public discussions and information sharing. Ethan Zuckerman, the co-founder of Global Voices, points out that citizens' media tend to work best in moderately repressive nations, not so well in highly repressive ones and only to a limited degree in countries with little or no repression (Zuckerman 2007). Thus, one could assume that there is a high demand for social media in Kenya given that the traditional media still face control of the government. And if everyday Kenyans, who may feel being excluded as citizens had access to these new services, we could assume that online communication would grow.

Social media have a strong expatriate influence. Many sites and weblogs are managed by Kenyans living overseas and foreigners residing in the country. Until recently, most African web contents were designed to cater to the needs of foreigners, visitors and investors, and the elites. Locally relevant websites are few (Chivanga 2005). Although the influence of contributions from outside Kenya is still noticeable, today, social media such as weblogs show more local contributions.

Needs for Mobile Services

Compared to internet access, mobile phones are far more ubiquitous, and could easily be utilized as social media tools. The challenge of mobile phones as mass form of communication is their dispersion. There is no central core for users to all tune in to

(Hersman 2008). There are web sites piling up information also from SMS messages, but there is no simple application to enter the data generated by mobile phones. Some bloggers have brought this up, and published their visions about a platform which could be accessed by mobiles, and not easily controlled by the government. Ethan Zuckerman emphasizes: “This is important for anyone concerned about applications for the developing world. While we all know that mobiles are the best platform (alongside radio) for reaching broad audiences, we need much better tools to build applications.” (Zuckerman 2008a.)

There is some lack of creative foresight to harness these new communication technologies in the context of people’s circumstances (Chivhanga 2005). Eric Hersman suggests: “How about a platform that serves as a centralized repository for on the ground reports from any Kenyan via SMS? The ability for people to upload videos and images with some text to a web-based and mobile phone accessible site.” (Hersman 2008.)

There were some inspiring examples of using mobile devices as social media tools in Kenya’s crisis. One such example is Voices of Africa, a concept of mobile reporters, which was also practiced in time of violence in Kenya. These local reporters used mobile phones and a portable keyboard to write, take photos, short videos, and also to publish their reports online. The project covered the electoral process from the preparations to the post-election violence and riots. The objectives of the project were to encourage Africans to build a media career, and to stimulate citizen journalism, which could serve democratic purposes (Voices of Africa 2008). The news coverage of the project probably interests mainly the audience outside the country, but it may also lead the way to new innovations with mobile technology.

Social Media for Social Change?

What is the relevance of social media and citizen journalism in the processes of democracy? In Kenya, the social media has proved to have a remarkable role during the media ban and the national crisis. Social media tools have opened up new possibilities for citizens to share their views in public and discuss the situation with other citizens and people globally. Mobile phones and web applications have enabled many Kenyans to contact and help relatives in risky areas. Kenyan bloggers have also tried to work towards more accessible information and transparency in decision making (e.g. Okolloh 2007).

Social media tools supplement rather than replace conventional media. Because they serve as channels of expression that cannot be easily controlled by the ruling power, they widen and diversify public discussion. They offer critical assessments and unmediated perspectives. However, the issue of whether discussions flowing from the grassroots affect power and the state of democracy remains unexplored. Ideally, social media tools could increase transparency in politics and enhance citizens' participation through enabling people to follow decision-making processes and hold discussions about issues of common concern. For most Kenyans, however, tapping the internet for the latest news in crisis is not a real option. Internet access is prohibitively expensive for the majority. There is a need for making new media tools more accessible to those who are less fortunate.

In situations of crisis when the mainstream media suffer restrictions and do not cover many events and grassroots opinions, new social media offer opportunities for a diversity of voices to be heard and connect with each other. Rather than speaking for

Kenyan people affected the situation, we could point to the several ways people raise their voices and make stories more nuanced.

Notes

¹ Daily Nation's figures on its website showed Odinga with over 4, 5 million votes and Kibaki just over 4, 2 votes. Kenya Television Network also displayed the advanced figures on December 30th 2008.

² The interviews were conducted between February and March 2008 by Mary Kuira.

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Productive' News Blackout". <http://allafrica.com/stories/200712310654.html>.

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