Tech for Good

Social Media and Digital Peacebuilding in Kenya's Elections (2007-2022)

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INTRODUCTION

Kenya has had a history of controversial elections since the advent of multiparty democracy in the early 1990s with varied consequences, including the eruption of violence, with worst cases witnessed in the 2007/2008 elections, where several people lost their lives, and thousands were displaced. The pre-2007 period also witnessed a rapid expansion of the telecommunication sector and the media environment characterized by an explosion of vernacular media outlets[1] that increased public engagement and civic participation on various topics. However, the emergence of social media innovation[2] has fundamentally changed political communication in the country with varied consequences demonstrated by the experiences of other post-2007 successive elections from 2013 to 2022. The latter, coupled with the expansion of the digital space through Kenya's robust broadband policy and digital transformation strategy, also means that more people now have access to digital platforms. In this context, social media has played an ambiguous role, both as tools for online polarization and conflict and, at the same time, as a critical platform for civic education and mobilization for peacebuilding

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1 See Ogenga, Fredrick. 2008. "The role of the Kenyan media in the 2007 elections." Journal of African Elections 7, no. 2: 124-134. Accessed December 19, 2022. https://eisa.org/pdf/JAE7.2Ogenga.pdf.

2 See Godin, B., Gaglio, G. and Vinck, D. 2021. Handbook on Alternative Theories of Innovation. Cheltenham: Edward Elger Publishing

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR BAD

When considering the adverse aspects, social media and digital technologies have had a negative impact on electoral violence in Kenya, echoing the widely held assumption that violence is closely associated with Kenya's elections. Interestingly, the deadly violence witnessed in 2007 coincided with the first time social media and digital technology were used for political ends, including campaigning and polling. This demonstrates the relations between social media, electoral conflict, and peacebuilding. In the struggle for power, several politicians use misinformation to fight their opponents through rumors, inaccurate and manipulated information to push political rhetoric online, making social media the hub of incitement. The use of social media, hence, emerged as the number one contributor of ethnic polarization and violence through the exploitation of ethnic differences for political mileage.[3] Furthermore, social media algorithms capitalize on sensational content to amplify misinformation and exacerbate political misinformation.[4]

[...] The use of social media [...] emerged as the number one contributor of ethnic polarization and violence through the exploitation of ethnic differences for political mileage.

Consequently, social media has been at the core of recent studies on media and political campaigns in Kenya.[5] Like in many parts of the world, big technology companies like Cambridge Analytica have been caught up in the middle of electoral controversies in Kenya.[6] They have been accused of influencing political persuasion during elections using social media. Nevertheless, social media has given birth to the new phenomenon of citizen journalism and cybercitizenship, where the internet has promoted cyberdemocracy, which is both an exciting and a worrying trend. Cyberdemocracy is the participation of citizens in democratic debates online, spearheaded by online communities.

During election campaigns,[7] ethnic hate speech fueling online polarization and subsequently, offline violence has been a notable occurrence. It was perpetrated by young online users or micro-influencers who have played significant roles in spreading hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation, often influenced by political aspirants.

3 Ogenga, F.2022. Mitigating Electoral Vionce through Social Media Micro Influencers. Baseline Report, Rongo University: Center for Media, Democracy, Peace and Security, http://repository.rongovarsity.ac.ke/handle/123456789/2430.
4 See Jaton, F. 2020. The Constitution of Algorithms: Ground-truthing, Programming, Formulating. Cambridge Massachissets: MIT Press.
5 See Ogenga, F. 2021. Kenya: Social Media Literacy, Ethnicity and Pecaebuilding. In Lisa, S. 2021. Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy: The Techtonic Shift: London, New York: Sage; Gagliardoe, I. 2019. Social Media and Elections in Africa. Oxford University Press; Published Online; Mutahi, P. and Kimari, B. 2017. The Impact of Social Media and Digital Tech on Electoral Violence in Kenya. IDS Working Paper Vol. 2017 No 493; Makinen, M. and Kuira, M. 2008. Social Media and Post Elections Crisis in Kenya. Information and Communications Technology Africa 13; Njeri, M. 2021 Influence Of Social Media on Political and Tribal Conflict in Kenya. Journal of Public Relations Vol. 1 Issue 1. 14028; Njuguna C. and Gikandi J., Ogola, L., and Murrithi, J. 2020. Social Media as the Battleground against Violence among Netizens Inafrica: The Case of Kenyan Youth. East Africa Journal of Arts and Social Sciences Vol 12 Issue 1; Odero, P. 2013. The Role of Social Media as a Tool for Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution in Kenya. – The Case of Nairobi County. Thesis. University of Nairobi
6 Ibid
7 Ogenga, F. Social Media Literacy, Ethnicity and Peacebuilding in Kenya. Policy Brief No 60. Toda Peace Institute

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR GOOD

In the 2007/08 election violence, social media tools were used to share critical information about the crisis. For example, platforms such as wikis, blogs, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter, and Mashups were employed to disseminate information about the Kenyan electoral crises both in 2007/8 and in 2017. Discussion forums and videos aimed at promoting peace and unity emerged on Flickr and YouTube. In 2007, citizens turned to social media as a means to actively engage in the political landscape, particularly after violence erupted.[8] According to Thinkersroom blog 2008, citizens were determined to gain a first-hand account of events that were unavailable on mainstream media. Kenyans took active roles as citizen journalists by reporting on the ongoing situation and expressing their thoughts online, such as on Mashada,com, Kwani.org, Thinkersroom.com, Afromusing.com, and Allafrica.com. "Social media generated an alternative public sphere which widened the perspective about the 2007/8 crisis" and enabled a new kind of citizen participation to emerge, allowing for horizontal information sharing.

Bloggers criticized the state crackdown and blamed politicians in the aftermath of both the 2007/8 and 2017 elections for inciting ethnic hate speech.[9] Under the rubric of "digital activists," social media continued to play a critical role in instances where citizen reporters presented grassroots views that were more diverse than those emerging from mainstream media. Digital technology and social media can, therefore lead to the development of people-centered early warning mechanisms such as crowdsourcing to empower people and communities to respond to threats. Kenyans utilized a wide variety of platforms for peacebuilding after post-election violence, including the Uwiano platform for peace, Ushahidi, opened Facebook pages such as Elections Witness Kenya and Umati or Crowd Monitoring Project. Further initiatives such as the Sentinel and iHub project in 2017 called Una Hakika ("are you sure?"), a mobile phone-based information service (to monitor the spread of rumors and contain them),[10] and more recently, the Maskani Social Media Platform that used WhatsApp and Facebook for digital peacebuilding ahead of the 2022 elections[11] emerged.

The chaos witnessed in Kenya's successive elections over the years demonstrates clearly how elites in Kenya benefit from the exploitation of identity politics through media propaganda to incite violence and human rights abuses. The 2017 media shutdown and the constant threats and harassment of journalists in the 2013, 2017, and 2022 elections should be a wake-up call for Kenya's mainstream media about

8 Mutahi, P. and Kimari, B. 2017. The Impact of Social Media and Digital Tech on Electoral Violence in Kenya. IDS Working Paper Vol. 2017 No 493
9 Ogenga, F.2022. Mitigating Electoral Vionce through Social Media Micro Influencers. Baseline Report, Rongo University: Center for Media, Democracy, Peace and Security, http://repository.rongovarsity.ac.ke/handle/123456789/2430.
10 Ibid
11 Ibid

[...] social media presented an opportunity to ventilate economic and electoral injustice frustrations, report, and document electoral-related violence in many ways [...]

the importance of fulfilling its watchdog role. Additionally, it should prompt the State to recognize the critical role of social media in cyberdemocracy. In the aftermath of the 2022 controversial presidential elections and subsequent street protests organized by the opposition, young influential political opponents who resort to social media as safe spaces to voice their frustrations faced threats, arrests, and intimidation.[12] Nevertheless, social media presented an opportunity to ventilate economic and electoral injustice frustrations, report, and document electoral-related violence in many ways, such as online monitoring through crowdsourcing, SMS reporting and mapping violent incidences, and sharing experiences through Facebook on the electoral conflict at the grassroots level.[13] In addition, other sites allowed for the sharing of videos and information, which enabled the mapping of violence and generated public attention towards preventive efforts by the government and other stakeholders. However, it is essential to point out that social media is not a silver bullet; this policy brief equally underscores the significant role played by other institutions such as the Independent Electoral Boundaries Commission, The Supreme Court of Kenya, the National Police Service, National Cohesion and Integration Commission, Kenya National Human Rights Commission and others for democratic transition and consolidation. These key institutions should be part of the conversation on digital peacebuilding strategies around electoral conflict and social media's centrality in democratic transition.

EXPLOITING THE GOOD SIDE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY COMPLEMENTING IT WITH OFFLINE APPROACHES

Social media can be used as a vehicle to combat hate speech, spread useful and empowering information, and support democracy and social change. Yet few civil society organizations, governments, and citizens really understand how social media works. Informed by the latter concern, initiatives are emerging, such as Maskani[14] (or dwelling/home in Swahili), that train the youth in social media literacy and digital peacebuilding in Kenya. Maskani is a collaborative project between BuildUp, the Center for Media, Democracy, Peace and Security, and The Peacemaker Corps Foundation Kenya. It involves six public universities in Western Kenya, over sixty students, and twelve faculty members. The Maskani project is currently supported by Konza Technopolis (Kenya's Silicon Valley or Silicon Savanna), a state agency in the Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Digital Economy responsible for Kenya's digital transformation. Maskani is both an online and offline movement that capitalizes on young influencers, channeling their energy and zeal into offline

12 Kimeu, C. 2022. On the Streets and Online Social Media Becomes Key to Protests in Kenya. The Guardian Tuesday 12 July 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/12/on-the-street-and-online-social-media-becomes-key-to-protest-in-kenya
13 Mutahi, P. and Kimari, B. 2017. The Impact of Social Media and Digital Tech on Electoral Violence in Kenya. IDS Working Paper Vol. 2017 No 493
14 See https://www.dmeforpeace.org/resource/maskani-is-our-new-normal-exploring-digital-peacebuilding-in-kenya-working-from-home-2020/ ; https://www.dmeforpeace.org/digital_peacebuilding_initiative/

spaces for traditional peacebuilding. They engage in activities involving music, art, and cultural strategies inspired by pan-African philosophies of Utu (humanity), Umoja (unity), and Harambe (collective responsibility or pulling together). This approach is exemplified by the #NguvuPamajoa digital peacebuilding campaign slogan, outlining a promising path that civil society, government and technological companies should follow and support for success in digital peacebuilding.

Nevertheless, this path is littered with numerous challenges, one being that of understanding relations between online and offline spaces in digital peacebuilding, identifying the gaps, and bridging them. As opposed to technologically-centered approaches to digital peacebuilding, there is an emerging scholarly concern regarding how to address the online-offline dynamic of user interaction, often captured by how youthful users online interact in offline spaces. It goes beyond considering the technological aspects, taking into account the influence of online action offline. Bridging these two dynamics is at the core of successful digital peacebuilding efforts. Understanding this context requires offline modes of inquiry and engagement. The latter has compelled peacebuilders to consider digital peacebuilding beyond virtual spaces, introducing a new dimension of digital peacebuilding that capitalizes on critical theories of technologies,[15] theories of innovation,[16] and theories of change in the context of art and culture, putting more attention to how the user exploitation of technology offline can be done in a manner that is less disruptive and less intrusive through everyday life[17] experiences (cultural artistic expressions), to lessen the unsustainable burden of incentivizing users (micro-influencers) in digital peacebuilding by capitalizing on locally available peacebuilding infrastructures inherent in them. This approach is emerging as one of the most affordable and flexible ways of incentivizing digital peacebuilding. Micro-influencers, for example, have readily available resources such as their online presence, digital literacy, and offline dynamism, making them fit for purpose. Therefore, the Maskani digital peacebuilding movement echoes the contribution of youth influencers in the digital peacebuilding sphere, extending beyond the online realm to include offline interactions driven through traditional face-to-face relations anchored on social trust, teambuilding, social support, and mutual responsibility (pan-African values of being).

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Why offline approaches?

Social media platforms and the reality they present have been taken for granted in such a way that users conflate sensory reality with virtual reality, resulting in significant negative consequences. For example, many users are unaware of the implications of what they post online and that social media is designed to amplify

15 Freenberg, A. Democratic Rationalization: Technology, Power and Freedom. In Rober, C. and Dusek, V. (eds.) 2014. Philosophy of Technology –The Technological condition on Anthology 2nd Edition. Malden, Ixford: Wiley Blackwell.
16 See Godin, B., Gaglio, G. and Vinck, D. 2021. Handbook on Alternative Theories of Innovation. Cheltenham: Edward Elger Publishing
17 See Morley, D. 2007. Media, Modernity and Technology- The Geography of the New. London: New York: Routledge

[...] it is necessary to adopt a creative capacity-building approach to citizen participation [...] to harness social media's potential in bringing about democratic and social change

negative content. These are basic understandings around the use of social media that can be taken for granted, yet they have emerged as the most significant contributors to online hate, polarization, misinformation, and disinformation. Social media exists within the virtual space, where user psychometric profiles are exploited for marketing purposes (surveillance capitalism) by business multinationals. These platforms do not only make the culture of excessive global consumerism and materialism acceptable beyond reasonable doubt (normalized), but they also train user attention through algorithms to maximize the amount of time spent online (understood as attention economy).[18]

Consequently, it is necessary to adopt a creative capacity-building approach to citizen participation in digital peacebuilding informed by local evidence to harness social media's potential in bringing about democratic and social change.[19] Theories of innovation and theory of change through art and culture can help divert technical barriers which, due to algorithms, lead people to only encounter beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own (selective reading) and may not consider alternative ideas (which is detrimental to a politically volatile and multicultural society like Kenya). For example, crowdsourcing platforms like Ushahidi (witness), early warning platforms like Unahakika ("are you sure" in English), and digital peacebuilding movements like Maskani (dwelling or home), all rely on offline flesh and blood humans off the virtual space to reach their peacebuilding objectives.[20] In such offline spaces, there are multiple opportunities for the organic transformation of human interactions. Because of systemic, structural, and moral constraints on the adoption, adaptation, and use of technology[21] especially in the global south, such as digital divide, illiteracy, marginalization, poverty, cultural issues, and ICT policy regulations, it is easy to see how digital peacebuilding cannot be confined online. This policy brief argues for a holistic society-wide approach to digital peacebuilding that considers both online and offline spaces and incites questions regarding the technical and contextual aspects of the application of technology, as well as ethical and moral implications of tech affordances for peacebuilding.[22]

18 See Schirch, L. 2021. The Techtonic Shift: How Social Media Works. In Schirch L. (ed.) Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy- The Techtonic Shift. London New York: Routledge. Pp 1-21
19 Freenberg, A. Democratic Rationalization: Technology, Power and Freedom. In Rober, C. and Dusek, V. (eds.) 2014. Philosophy of Technology –The Technological condition on Anthology 2nd Edition. Malden, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell
20 See Ogenga, Fredrick. 2021. "Kenya. Social media literacy, ethnicity and peacebuilding". In Social media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy, edited by Lisa Schirch. London: Routledge.
21 See Broussard, M. 2023. How to Investigate an Algorithm. Issues in Science and Technology, Summer 2023; Broussard, M. 2023. More than a Glitch: Confronting Race, Gender, and Ability Bias in Tech. Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press
22 See Powell, A., Ustek-Spilda, F, Lehuede, S. and Shklovski, I. 2022. Addressing Ethical Gaps in 'Technology for Good': Foregrounding Care and Capabilities. Big Data and Society, Vol 9, Issue 2, July-December 2022. Retrieved 20th July 2022 from www. Addressing ethical gaps in 'Technology for Good': Foregrounding care and capabilities (sagepub.com)

POLICY OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For political parties

— They should encourage political messaging that fosters peace, unity, and cohesion beyond just the electioneering period.

— The parties should develop and agree on an election code of conduct, which should consider the use of social media and party organs or structures to sanction misconduct of their members during campaigns.

— For the government (State agencies involved in elections)

— The government should invest in social media literacy programs targeted at politicians and state officers since politicians are the major source of social media hate and weaponization, especially during electioneering campaigns by forming partnerships and alliances with tech companies and academics.

— The government should partner with tech companies and micro-influencers to moderate hateful political content online.

For tech companies

— Tech companies should partner with the government to invest in content moderators working closely with social media micro-influencers on social media misinformation and hate speech.

— Tech companies should work closely with the government to help sensitize users on how to monetize positive intervention online, within the framework of electoral polarization for peacebuilding, and enable the use of their platforms to incentivize digital peacebuilding.

For micro-influencers

— They should partner with civil society groups, social media tech companies, and academics on sensitization programs centering on the centrality of their influencer role on social media platforms to be incentivized as digital peacebuilding ambassadors. They should be empowered to be aware of the power of their influence.

— Partner with the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture to exploit their creative talent involving music, art, and culture online and offline for electoral peacebuilding.

For civil societies and academics

— Civil society should take the lead in designing and implementing digital peacebuilding Pan-African curriculums and supporting locally led grassroots practical interventions on electoral and other forms of conflict that are inspired by local evidence production by collaborating closely with academia, who should champion local evidence production, and social media micro-influencers.

— Support offline youth peacebuilding approaches involving music arts and cultural strategies centered on electoral polarization to complement online digital peacebuilding and use their experiences and knowledge to improve digital peacebuilding initiatives

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ABOUT SWISSPEACE

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

While much of the literature on social media and elections has focused on the negative influence of social media during electoral processes, this policy brief centers on the exploitation of social media for good. It explores how these technologies can be harnessed for positive outcomes, not confined solely to the virtual realm but extended into the offline domain through the engagement of youthful influencers using mediums such as music, art, and cultural strategies.