

Socialising Government: Evaluating the Role of Social Media in Governance and Ethics in Kenya¹

Alex N. Kamwaria

John Macharia Kamau

Anne Juliet Githaiga

Peter Mutuma Guantai

Rukahū Mugwe

Kasoo Richard Makin

Golo Boru Dida

Institute of Security Studies, Justice and Ethics
School of Social Sciences
Mount Kenya University
Thika, Kenya

Abstract

Social media involves social networking sites, such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, blogs, MySpace, YouTube, Instagram, and Weechat. Currently, social media is gaining popularity in the field of governance and ethics. Governance and ethics are matters of principled sensitivity to the rights of others. Good governance is concerned with the balance between the policies, on the one hand, and respect and responsibility to the citizens, on the other. This balance is particularly important because sound governance and sound ethics go hand in hand. This article articulates on the role of social media in promoting good governance and ethics. Since social media is relatively accessible and cheaper; it is the best and versatile publicist tool that the government can utilize to engage the public on policy and development issues. However, social media is a double-edge sword; it can build as well as destroy. As such, there is need to exercise caution in its use.

Keywords: Governance, Ethics, Social Media, Internet technology, Facebook, Twitter

1. Introduction

The world of digital internet technology is fast evolving, and is becoming the most sophisticated and yet vital means of communication. Social media is the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogue. With the availability and spread of internet across the globe, and the development of Facebook in 2003, there are an ever increasing number of social media platforms (Digital Trends Staff, 2014). Millions of people around the world now interact with each other in respect to politics, business, education, entertainment, and other social networking forums. As the technology evolves, the public institutions across the globe are left with no choice other than adopting the new digital technology. In Kenya, availability of internet has increased for the last one decade especially in the urban centers. This has enabled the growth and development of social media presence in the country. Kenya has well established infrastructure that is catalyzed by high speed internet. In addition, mobile phones with internet applications are owned by majority of people, both in urban and rural settings. The government of Kenya, in keeping pace with fast growing digital technology, has gone ahead to incorporate ICT infrastructure in its operations. Apart from creating forums for public participation in governance through social media, the government has also reviewed some regulations to embrace digital technology and therefore important issues can be tackled through Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Skype, Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, Instagram, Weechat, and other means of social media platforms.

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Alex Kamwaria [e-mail: akamwaria@yahoo.com].

Consequently, many state officers are currently engaging with the public through social media on issues pertaining to the welfare of the country (Wangui, 2014).

During the 2013 electoral campaigns, almost all the presidential candidates had Facebook pages, Twitter handles, and other social media networks. Other candidates vying for gubernatorial, members of parliaments, and members of the County assemblies also had intensified activities in the social media forums. The might of a candidate could be reflected by the number of followers each of those candidates had. The social media pages mostly in Facebook and Twitter carried posters and manifestos of those candidates, but more importantly carried the daily posts of campaign meetings showing photographs of large campaign gatherings of each candidate. Social media provided forums for the citizens to interact with their preferred candidates, while also providing means of convincing the neutrals to join their camps (Wasswa, 2013). This enhanced the levels of citizen participation. The level of citizen participation was evident in the Presidential debate hosted by all main media streams in Kenya. The citizens had chances to engage the candidate's right from the comfort of their sitting room.

2. Social Media in the Government

The current government in Kenya, dubbed the 'Jubilee Government', has branded itself as the "Digital Government." The government pledged to digitize most of its operations since it took the reins of power. Though the Jubilee Government may not have fully lived to its digitalization promise, it is ranked higher in comparison with the previous governments in respect to use of social media technology. In addition, a survey conducted by the Digital Impact Awards Africa (2014) ranked President Uhuru Kenyatta, the current president, as the most active president in Africa both in Facebook and Twitter, with at least one post daily in his pages. The survey also revealed that his team in the government often responded to comments and queries in those pages. In an interview in the local TV, the president admitted that he sometimes engages Kenyans at personal level through the social media platform, especially when a matter at hand is of great national importance. He further noted that he analyses the comments and queries he receives through social media to gauge the mood of the citizens on various issues, which in turn assists him in making the right decisions (Kenyatta, 2014).

Many government departments are also actively involved in social media. This is mostly through the use of Twitter handles to communicate what they are doing to the general public. One of the most notable departments actively involved in the social media is the Kenya Defense Forces. During the operation against the al-Shabaab militia in Somali, popularly known as "Operation Linda Nchi" (operation protect the nation), the Kenya Defense Forces regularly updated the citizens on the progress of the operation through its official Twitter handles (Kenya Defense Forces, 2014). Another notable example is the Judiciary, where the Chief Justice and President of Supreme Court consistently update the country on what is happening in the judicial arm of government (Mutunga, 2014).

Social media can be used as a tool for propaganda and generating mass support. In Kenya, the Twitter and Facebook have been used by the government to communicate to citizens on issues affecting them in an effort to generate support before major decisions are made. For example, the President and his Deputy always ask for Kenyans' views and support before tabling bills in Parliament or signing them into law. Through social media, the President asked for support of the terror Bill by giving their opinions (Chai, 2014).

Social media platform offers the ability to connect each and every individual. Such an interaction also enables the marginalized to participate in discussions and present their point of view, thereby improving the political position of marginalized or vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, and minorities. For example, in Kenya social media has helped the marginalized to communicate their needs for socio-economic opportunities. In this way, the government has set aside funds for marginalized and vulnerable groups (Danida Kenya, 2014)

Social media can be used in community policing. This is best demonstrated by the efforts of one Chief Kariuki, who uses Twitter to curb crime in Lanet, Nakuru County.

Due to his versatility in the use of the Twitter, he is popularly referred to as "the tweeting chief." The chief has trained other chiefs in the Nakuru County on how to use Twitter to help curb crime in their areas of jurisdiction. Also, through such efforts, the Chief has been able to strengthen the 'Nyumba Kumi' (Kiswahili phrase meaning ten households) security initiative in his locality (Nendo, 2014). The initiative is based on community policing, whereby ten households in a neighborhood make one cluster of a security administrative. The cluster is supposed to be politically neutral but can discuss social and economic issues.

The cluster tackles a range of security problems from gender based violence and crime to lack of trust between community and security providers, inter-ethnic tensions or weapons proliferation. The head of each cluster works hand in hand with the government administrator, such as chief and police officers. In case of any security problem, members of the cluster alert their leader and discuss the issue before taking it to the next level depending. Communication is done through mobile phones and verbally.

3. Ethical Issues in Social Media

Social media is being used by people of all races and walks of life whether young or old, and also in all the fields of life like in business, education, and religion. Many people socially interact and create, share or exchange information, ideas, pictures, videos and many other things. With this great evolution and adoption of social media as part of our daily lives, the question of ethics cannot be ignored. The arrival of broad reaching and unrestricted social channel of communications has brought up the issue of consumer vulnerability to scams and deception. This has led to social media receiving a lot of attention in terms of ethics. Several ethical issues have emerged, which revolve around user privacy, scamming, public bashing, impersonation, and anonymous profiles.

User privacy in the social media can be violated through harming the credibility of an individual. For example, sharing the profile information of an individual without his/ her consent can lead to damaging of character and reputation of the individual. Scamming is also an unethical issue since user profiles are filled with promotional messages which are mostly deceiving and misleading (Scamwatch, 2014). Such messages end up ruining the social platform for sharing of useful information.

Another ethical issue is public bashing, whereby the users of social media post negative sentiments about others, especially those they are in competition with. This may end up ruining an individual's image and reputation, and may even end up in legal suits.

Impersonation has also escalated and has become a big ethical issue in social media. Some people have been opening accounts and profiles using the names of others, especially celebrities and public figures, without their awareness or permission. This can end up ruining the image of that a person if the profile is used for the wrong reasons.

Anonymous profiles, as the name suggests, are not attributed to anybody. Such profiles are mostly used for the unethical motives, such as promoting hatred, fraud, and posting inappropriate contents like pornography in social sites. This is unethical since any user can access such content. More often than not, the content end up being viewed by underage children, who access such social sites without the knowledge of their parents.

4. Challenges of Social Media in Governance

In the 21st century, the revolutions experienced by states may not be televised, but will likely be tweeted, blogged, texted, and organized on Facebook. The social media can be considered the first weapon of mass construction that can be deployed to by masses to destroy, hate, and conflict. Social media faces the following challenges in governance issues:

4.1 Cyber Utopianism

Cyber utopianism is the belief that online communication is in itself emancipatory, and that the internet favors the oppressed rather than the oppressor. It overestimates the revolutionary potential of social media. It is a form of organizing that favors the weak-tie connections that give us access to information over the strong-tie connections that help us persevere in the face of danger. Cyber utopianism is seen by elitists as naïve and stubborn since it plants in the mind of the users ideas that cannot be put into practice. For example, after the terror attack in West Gate business premise in Kenya, thousands of people took to Twitter to analyze the handling of events by the Kenya Defense and Police forces (Nipate.com, 2013). Instead of supporting the forces, they criticized the forces thus helping the terrorists to reach their goal of destabilizing and dividing Kenyans.

4.2 Freedom of Expression

Social media gives freedom of expression, but the freedom is misused, over-indulged, or abused due to the impersonal nature of communication on media. For example, during the use of Alco-blow gadget by the traffic police to curb drunk driving, most Kenyans took to Twitter to help drunken drivers to evade arrest by the traffic police.

4.3 Cyber Crime

Cybercrime involves using the internet as the subject of the crime. Kenya is experiencing a growing number of cybercrimes that threaten national security, information, communications and technology, infrastructure, as well as citizens' privacy. The country is losing billions of shillings through cybercrimes. Kenya ranks fourth in Africa in cybercrime after Algeria, Egypt and South Africa (Cyber Security Team, 2012). Kenya is a soft target for these attacks because 85% of all web applications in the country are unsecure and available for attacks (CEO Survey, 2014). The major types of crime likely to be encountered in the cyberspace include:

- 4.3.1 Spam: This is usually unwanted e-mail advertising about a product sent to a list of e-mails or group of e-mail addresses. Spammers send the unwanted mails or messages to billions of users of social networks in order to lure them to giving vital information that assist in gathering the personal information of the unsuspecting users (Information Security Awareness, 2014).
- 4.3.2 Scams: This is the situation whereby some people send e-mails or messages with links to users which ask for the profile information and tell the users that they would add new followers. These links sent to the users would be applications, games, etc. So, whenever the users post their details in the link, the details would be received by scammers and the information would be misused (Information Security Awareness, 2014).
- 4.3.3 Phishing: This is the creation of a fake site just similar to the original site. Social network phishing comes up with fake mails and messages like offering some specialized themes, updating the profile, updating the security applications/ features, etc. In order to see the updates, the user needs to follow a link and log in, through which the credentials are taken by the attacker. The linked page is a fake copy of the original log in page, focused on stealing user account credentials (Information Security Awareness, 2014).
- 4.3.4 Click jacking: This is a malicious technique of tricking web users into revealing confidential information or taking control of their computer while clicking on seemingly innocuous web pages. Due to vulnerability across a variety of browsers and platforms, a click jacking takes the form of embedded code or script that can run without the user's knowledge. The same is followed in the social networking domain. The objective behind such an attack is that users can be tricked into clicking on the links, icons, buttons, etc. which could trigger running of processes at the background without the knowledge of the user (Information Security Awareness, 2014).
- 4.3.5 Malicious applications: This is infecting a computer through different applications while using or installing software. More often than not, malicious applications are acquired by opening the social networking application to start the installation process. In order to fulfill its intended operation, the application requests for some privileges from the user like access to basic information, updates on the user's social network wall, etc. In this case, the criminal sends malicious software to a person's computer and uses the software once installed to gain access to the user's computer. Such malicious software is sent as a link via social media (Information Security Awareness, 2014).
- 4.3.5 Social hacking: This is the act of manipulating outcomes of social behavior through orchestrated actions. The general function of social hacking is to gain access to restricted information without proper permission. Most often, social hacking attacks are achieved by impersonating an individual or group that is directly or indirectly known to the victims or by representing an individual or group in a position of authority (Information Security Awareness, 2014).

4.4 Double-Edged Sword

Social media can build and destroy. Kenya is a signatory to international and regional instruments guaranteeing the right of freedom of expression and the right of access to information. There is a mismatch between allowing citizens their right to freedom of expression and hate speech. Also there is not clear differentiation between harmful content (which must be prohibited) and objectionable content (which is not prohibited). In addition, social media can spread hatred, ethnocentrism, and conflict as well as propagate peace and democracy.

4.5 Romanticizing Serious Issues

Social media tends to dismiss serious issues as mere fantasies. Since the communication is not face to face and thus impersonal, users of social media tend to bring humor, jest, and mockery to certain issues of local or national importance. In the end, a serious issue, strategy, plan, or debate is tugged down to a failed attempt at manipulating Kenyans. For example, after the West Gate attack by terrorists in Kenya, most people used Twitter to haul blames on the Kenyan security forces for their incompetence in handling the terrorists (Nipate.com, 2013).

In the eyes of such people, the scenario was like an action movie, while in the eyes of the security forces, Kenya was under terrorist attack and they were really fighting the terrorists. The seriousness of the devotion and patriotism that the security forces displayed during that attack was romanticized through exchanges on the social media involving people seated in their comfort zones.

Another example was during the National Presidential Debates that preceded the March 2014 general elections. Before and even during the debate, most Kenyans took to Twitter to make fun of the presidential candidates (Mwenda, 2013; Nipate.com, 2013). Such a serious debate was turned into who could crack the biggest joke that could shoot down the credibility and character of a presidential candidate. Instead of enhancing the debate, social media turned into a forum for defacing, politicizing, criticizing, mockery, character assassination, and ridiculing issues that required serious discussions.

4.6 Treats for Selfish Gain

More often than not, social media has been used as a tool for fixing others negatively. Some people get on social media to frame, criticize, mock, or put pressure on individuals in order to ruin their reputations. For example, the very popular but currently blocked Facebook page “Dead Beat Kenya” was used to expose men in Kenya that sacrificed their marriage to extramarital affairs (Noack, 2014). In as much as it is wrong for men to fail to take on responsibility for their families, the Facebook page was very inappropriate and damaging. Some key leaders, including Senators, Governors, and members of the County Assembly were exposed in the page by their ex-lovers, or people just interested in ruining their character and reputation. Such use of social media is dangerous when it targets leaders especially those that are elected as representatives of the people. Instead of using the social media as a tool for national integration and cohesion, it is used as an instrument of mockery, ridicule, and division. No respect for authority is given or observed in the numerous negative posts on Twitter and Facebook. Worse still, the posts can be deleted thus easing the evasion of court cases for hate speech.

5. Way Forward

Having dissected various issues related to social media and governance, the following could help in mitigating the ethical issues and challenges.

- 5.1 The Ministry of Information in collaboration with the Communications Authority of Kenya and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission should sponsor a bill to be set before Parliament seeking to amend the Kenya Information and Communications Act in an attempt to furnish the country with more Cyber law provisions. This would help in ensuring that the regulation of content on social media does not infringe on the people’s right to freedom of expression.
- 5.2 The government should keep up with the current technologies and incorporate them in the fight against Cyber crime. This can be done through setting tendering for reputable companies to provide Cyber crime prevention technologies.
- 5.3 There should also be a stronger partnership between the government and private sector in order to build an adequate response to Cyber security threats.
- 5.4 The government should train more information security experts to be able to ensure that the country has skilled and competent personnel that can help secure the ICT infrastructure as well as coordinate response to Cyber security threats.

6. Conclusion

Millions of Kenyans now interact with each other in social media platform. As the digital technology evolves, the government of Kenya is left with little choice other than adopting the new technology. The current government has realized that it cannot ignore digital technology, and has gone ahead to incorporate ICT in its structures. Systems have been put in place to enable citizens’ participation in various policies.

Moreover, government ministries and departments have reviewed some regulations to engage important issues through Facebook, Twitter, Skype, blogs, and other means of social media platforms.

Social media has great potential of socializing government, enhancing good governance, and ethics. It can be used by the government as a publicist avenue for propaganda and mobilization of the masses towards a vibrant civil society. Since social media can reach out to the right people, the government should capitalize on it to further its agenda on national integration, cohesion and development. Social media provides easy access to information and gives freedom of expression.

The current government has made significant achievements in socializing governance, community policing, and crime reporting compared to the previous governments. However, it noteworthy that social media has been quite misused, over-indulged, or abused due to its impersonal nature of communication and deficient Cyber laws.

References

- CEO Survey. (2014). Global Economic Crime Survey: Kenya Report. Nairobi: Price Water-house Coopers.
- Chai, K. (2014). President Kenyatta lays down his vision for the country's security. Retrieved December 20, 2014 from KassFM.co.ke: <http://kassfm.co.ke/home/index.php/component/k2/item/1833-president-kenyatta-lays-down-his-vision-for-the-country%E2%80%99s-security.html>
- Cyber Security Team. (2012). Kenya Cyber Security Report 2012. Nairobi: SERIANU.
- Danida Kenya. (2014). Using ICT to Promote Governance. Retrieved December 20, 2014, from Danida Kenya: <http://um.dk/en/~media/UM/English-site/Documents/Danida/Partners/Research-Org/Research-studies/Using%20ICT%20to%20Promote%20Governance%202012.ashx>.
- Digital Trends Staff. (2014). The History of Social Media. Retrieved December 19, 2014, from Digital Trends: <http://www.digitaltrends.com/features/the-history-of-social-networking>.
- Information Security Awareness. (2014). Social Networking Risks and Challenges. Retrieved December 18, 2014, from <http://infosecawareness.in/students/social-networking-risks-and-challenges>.
- Kenya Defense Forces. (2014). Kenya Defense Forces (KDF). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from Twitter.com: <https://Twitter.com/kdfinfo>.
- Kenyatta, U. (2014). One on One with President Uhuru Kenyatta. (Live Interview in Citizen Television). Royal Media Services: Nairobi.
- Mutunga, W. (2014). Retrieved December 18, 2014, from Twitter.com: <https://Twitter.com/WMutunga>.
- Mwenda, F. (2013). Frankmwenda.com. Retrieved December 18, 2014, from <http://www.frankmwenda.com/2013/02/crazy-kot-and-mkz-debate-analysis.html>.
- Nendo. (2014). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from Nendo.co.ke: <http://atozTwitter.nendo.co.ke/c-is-for-chiefkariuki/>
- Nipate.com. (2013). Westgate KDF Looting - Shebab Response. Retrieved November 28, 2014, from Nipate.com: <http://nipate.com/west-gate-kdf-looting-shebab-response-t32627.html>
- Noack, R. (2014). How a Facebook group in Kenya is shaming deadbeat parents. Retrieved November 26, 2014, from The Washington Post: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/09/17/how-a-facebook-group-in-kenya-is-shaming-deadbeat-parents/>
- Scamwatch. (2014). What is a social networking scam? Retrieved November 28, 2014, from Scamwatch in Government: <http://www.scamwatch.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/829402>.
- Wangui, J. (2014). Government Goes Big on Social Media. Business and Tech. Nairobi, Kenya.
- Wasswa, W. H. (2013). The Role of Social Media in the 2013 Presidential Election. University of Nairobi, Institute of Development Studies. Nairobi: University of Nairobi.