

Social Media: The Double-edged Sword for Self-expression in Kenya

In the notorious star bus, a young man lowers his head, fixes his eyes on his smart phone, swipes the screen and smiles at it. I could vividly see what he was writing because I was sitting directly behind him. He was very busy on the social network and one could get the feeling that the young man was finally catching up with the outside world after a busy day at work.

As the world is gradually reduced to a global village, the use of internet and social media especially among the young people has taken a new dimension. Today's youth spend a high proportion of their time immersed in electronic media. Technology has become second nature to them; A way of life. It's how they communicate, interact and form new social connections. To some people, the social media is a gateway to the world while to others it is a platform to haul abuses at others and spread hate speech.

More young Kenyans are joining their Smartphone-toting peers worldwide: a generation that cannot imagine living without their all-in-one gadget. Ordinarily, social media should be a source of information and an imaginary highway to broaden the intellectual acumen. Unfortunately, this new and exciting online platform is being used by some individuals and groups who are trying to set malicious agendas by posting insensitive hate speech and remarks. People whose opinion I once trusted have been posting hateful remarks that can be described as 'uneducated, demeaning and shocking' and continuously appear on my Facebook news feed.

The use of social media has expanded since 2007 thanks to cheaper, faster and advanced Smart phones, affordable internet connections and cooler applications that have resulted to new forums that offer time-consuming expression. After the 2013 elections, significant numbers of Kenyans on Twitter and Facebook are purging their followers and friends as a tide of hate speech (which is encouraging tribal divisions) sweeps through social media. The inherent divisions in the country such as party inclination and patriotism between the government and opposition and ethnic hatred have driven online users to take sides that have resulted in inflammatory views and hate speech directed to each another to show the division in the country's diversity.

Facebook and Twitter which are the most popular social media sites in Kenya are believed to have become the new political battleground for the Kenyans who have access to the internet. This clique of 'online society' has become very influential as observed with on the twitter handle Kenyans on Twitter (#KOT) because they are able to shape the society.

Among the big-name of Facebook users is our President who actively communicates with the public through his Facebook page which features photos of his official events and statements. The postings

always elicit various discussions among the public in the social media who comment along ethnic and political party dimensions. Unfortunately, many of these comments feature derogatory metaphors historically used to belittle members of other tribes. The hate speech circulating on Facebook has raised the eyebrows of many as some of the youth openly attack each other online and at times incite people to commit violent acts against each other along ethnic lines.

Many online users who have harbored deep hatred towards people of other ethnic groups now have a channel to vent their anger, provoke and stir sentiments albeit irrationally. Online hate speech is a worrying trend and something else may be at play. There are big groups with huge funding and backgrounds that intentionally create hate speech to incite violence around the country. Could it be a pre-planned scheme to set back the country in to conflict?

Some Facebook pages are camouflaged as football fan pages and humorous content to attract followers. The pages then change their personalities, incorporating more and more nationalistic content as time goes by. These kinds of Facebook accounts and pages are very alike with the status they have or photos they post being very similar. Sometimes, they use their dialect to post all kinds of hateful remarks about other members of a particular political group. Whenever these remarks have been posted, many users comment and share thus the information is spread within a shorter time.

Although the level of maturity of the general internet users leaves much to be desired, the government should control online expression and regulate the online users. However, scarily the Kenya's law enforcement and justice systems are not yet equipped to handle cases related to cyber-crime. The lack powerful mandate for governmental institutions to respond to the growing challenges could seriously affect the country's online space in view of the boom of the telecommunication industry. The youth need to be sensitized to critically think about all the media they use so that they can recognize hate in all its forms. Teaching young people about how the hate groups communicate their messages can help alert them to "red flags" that show that someone is trying to manipulate them.

Parents, teachers and community leaders must deal with youth who have created or spread online hate or who have become involved with hate groups. Fortunately, many of the same tools that we use to prepare youth for encountering online hate are effective in helping them get out of the "hate trap" as well. The most important thing is to teach them critical thinking and help them understand how tribalism and prejudice are illogical. Critically examining the assumptions that go into intolerance and hate speech can show how unfounded they are. By learning about the world, by gaining knowledge and skills, and by using everyday tools to engage with others, we can all share, connect, and join a growing community of peace builders. Every one must stand up to be counted in fighting hate speech for the survival of mankind.

