THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEWS CONVEYANCE IN UGANDA

Joachim Bibuli

Coordinator

Center for Information Policy in Africa

Kampala, Uganda

E-address:joachyb@gmail.com

jbibuli@cipa.or.ug

Tel:+256-752-552223

+256-392-946679

Profile

Bibuli Joachim is an Information Science professional with a Bachelor's Degree in library and Information Science (BLIS Hons) and a Master's of Science in Information Science of Makerere University. Joachim has gained a wealth of experience in Knowledge Management, Information literacy, Records and Archives Management , Research and Documentation , Human Rights and Advocacy among others having worked with Academia, Government, Civil Society and the Private Sector. He is currently a Coordinator at Center for Information Policy in Africa an indigenous NGO in Uganda that seeks to empower communities to access information and effectively participate in the development process.

Abstract

Today technology has provided a rich menu of emails, Facebook, twitter, YouTube, Myspace and whastsapp among others. Because today's society is highly dependent on exchange of information, through these many platforms we are able to communicate, share and disseminate knowledge and information among others. Social media particularly Facebook, twitter and YouTube were blamed for stoking fires and inciting citizens in the September 2009 riots in Buganda and the walk to work protests. This state of play has had far reaching ramifications for media independence and unprecedented growth of social media in Uganda with the regime instituting draconian censorship measures against the media and the media generally retreating into self-censorship. Instead of being censored many have resorted to the internet particularly social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, twitter and personal blogs to avoid this state interference. These alternative news sources are experiencing phenomenal growth and threatening the very existence of traditional media. However the Government in an effort to undo damage done by media closures and stall the growth of social media has resorted to less visible means to infringe on internet freedoms.i.e setting up of a social media monitoring unit and ordering service providers to block access to internet. Literature searches and document analysis were used to collect information for this paper. Social media has given voice to news and opinions that are often ignored by mainstream media that is largely state controlled .Social media has also been instrumental in highlighting human rights violations by state machinery especially the police and in helping citizens and media actors to circumvent state control, interference and intimidation.

Keywords: Social media, News content, Uganda

1.0 Introduction

Creating and replicating knowledge are important for sustainable development. Only a few years back the fax was a great addition to a limited collection of communication tools. Today technology has evolved to give us emails, Facebook, twitter, YouTube, Myspace and whastsapp among others. The internet has enabled a range of new platforms for personal and social interactions particularly through social media. Murugesan (2007) posits that social media includes a multitude of sources of online information that are created, circulated and used. He adds that current examples of social media platforms include social networking sites like Facebook, photo sharing sites like Flickr, video sharing sites like YouTube, business networking sites like LinkedIn, micro blogging sites like Twitter, and numerous others. Social media sites are inexpensive and, more often than not, completely free to use. Social media allow users to interact, to share content, and to create content collectively (O'Reilly, 2005; Shirky, 2008; Gauntlett, 2011).

The Freedom on the Net report (2012) notes that in Uganda social media use has grown by leaps and bounds largely due to the growth in internet penetration which now stands at 15 % of the country's population of 35 million people. It adds that many users access internet (social media) on their phones with service providers such as MTN (with the largest number of subscribers) and Orange Telecom offering their subscribers free access to social networking site Facebook. Another telecom operator Airtel also offers its user's free access to an online news portal called UGO Uganda. Social media has now become an important source of knowledge making it possible to share mutual information and knowledge so quickly on a large scale. Ford (2012) adds that users of social media have now recognised the value of consuming diverse viewpoints to help them make up their minds in a society where they are often called to present their opinions on blogs and Twitter lists among others. In this paper i contend that the growing prevalence of mobility, unrestricted content and access, ability to evade state control ,interference and intimidation ,shared global ownership and freely accessible processes for technology have conspired to make social media a force to reckon with in raising awareness of news content to users in Uganda.

1.1 Social media

JISC (2010) defines social media or Web 2.0 technologies as "innovative online tools designed to enhance communication and collaboration". Beer (2008) adds that social media includes a variety of specific tools or applications, such as blogs, Twitter, online videos, social networks, and other online and electronic tools. The rise of social-networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and others has encouraged their users to communicate and interact in new ways that potentially disrupt existing media (Abdelhay, 2012). Jenkins (2006) calls this the rise of "participatory culture" in which ordinary people can create their own content and distribute it via social networks. As observed by Boyd and Ellison (2007), more people especially the youth now use social media to express their opinions and communicate with others. This he argues allows individuals to construct information with a bounded system and share connections with other users. This (Beer, 2008; Wilson, 2008) postulate, expands the opinions from an individual perspective of information transmission to participatory information transmission.

Baker (2011) observes that the introduction of ''Web 2.0'', which is characterised by user generated content and interactive social media, for example, allows public users to co-develop and exchange content on the internet via blogging, tagging, wikis, and media sharing, and to network socially in novel ways via the proliferation of social networking sites, such as, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Furthermore Pascuet al.(2008,p. 39), points out that there are at least three dimensions defining the role of the users: users are suppliers of content, users support the distribution of content and service, and users have critical roles in the selection and filtering of relevant content and services. (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) note that social media allows instant transfers of video and picture material, as well as maintaining blogs. This phenomenon rides on the back of "Ubuntu" (sharing) creating a pool of freely accessible information and knowledge.

1.2 Social media in Uganda

Content via the Internet spreads faster and to more people than via traditional media platforms. This is very true for Uganda whose population now stands at 35.6 million people with an internet penetration of 15% which translates to 5 million users (Freedom on the Net Report, 2012). A great majority of Ugandans access internet from their mobile phones. Despite this growth in internet penetration access is still hindered by poor infrastructure, prohibitive costs and poor quality of service.

Uganda has one of the youngest populations in the world with more than half the population below the age of 20 years. The adoption of social media practices in this case is to some extent a generation issue given that the majority of users are young while the old have been left to watch from the periphery. Social media platforms, blogging platforms are however freely available in Uganda with Facebook, Twitter, linkedn and blogger ranking among the top 15 websites in Uganda according to Alex.com. Furthermore two telecom service providers namely MTN and Orange telecom offer their subscribers free access to Facebook while Airtel Uganda began offering its customers in early 2013 free access to Uganda Goes Online-an online portal that provides information and local content ranging from news,entertainment,sports,technology and much more. The Freedom on the Net report (2012) reports that blogging is on the rise among young Ugandans who are less fearful in their use of the internet as an open space to push the boundaries and comment on controversial issues such as good governance and corruption.

Despite the free availability of these platforms some topics in Uganda are a taboo and cannot be discussed. These are the military; presidents' family; oil; land grabbing and presidential terms.

However as noted in the Freedom on Net report (2012) most Governments like the Government of Uganda are resorting to less visible means to infringe on internet freedoms often by increasing their technical and administrative authority to monitor individuals' online behavior or communications. The report adds that during particularly contentious events, a few governments have used their control over the telecommunications infrastructure to cut off access to the internet or mobile phone service in a town, region or the entire country .In Uganda Naturinda (2011) reports that the Uganda Communications Commission, quietly asked Internet service providers to block communication on Facebook and Twitter messaging platforms for 24 hours during the Walk-to-Work campaign in 2011. However, Internet services carried on without a glitch that day save for subscribers on one network who experienced intermittent interruptions. Furthermore Daily Monitor (2013) reports that on May 30, 2013 the Government announced that it had established a Social media monitoring unit in its Media center to "to weed out those who use it to damage the government and people's reputations." And also targeted at those "bent to cause a security threat to the nation. The ability to evade state machinations and control has contributed to the growth of social media as a source of uncensored news.

1.3 Social media and news conveyance

Journalism it is often said comprises disseminating information and ideas to the public by any means of communication. This could be online or through print. However it is worth noting that not many studies have been done on the use of social media in news conveyance but the few that have been done like Armstrong and Gao (2010) looked at how news organizations use Twitter. The study found out that Twitter was being used as a news dissemination tool, and the most frequently tweeted topics by news organisations were crime (26.3 per cent), followed by public affairs (22 per cent) and lifestyle (16.6 per cent). On the other hand, international news (7.5 per cent) was the least tweeted topic. A similar study done by Palser (2009) revealed that news organizations such as the Los Angeles Times and San Diego public radio station KPBS used Twitter to disseminate urgent bits of information like evacuation orders, shelter locations, and firefighting progress to large groups of mobile people in Southern California during the wildfires that broke out in 2007.

Thanks to the Internet, traditional media – both print and broadcast – are no longer fully in charge of the information flow and no longer hold a monopoly over it. Anyone with access to a computer or a smartphone can gather and disseminate information. Anyone can make their own broadcast. Anyone can publicly communicate their opinions and ideas to the entire world via a blog or social media network. The Internet has transformed the way in which we communicate with one another. Where the printed press and broadcast media were once the main sources of information, the Internet has made it possible for any person to publish ideas, information and opinions to the entire world. In particular, blogging and social media now rival newspapers and television as dominant sources of news and information. Blogs, are now recognised as being sometimes influential in politics and the news (Elmeret al., 2007; Smith, 2006; Trammell and Britton, 2005; Wall, 2005).Abdelhay (2012) adds that the changing media environment in which the media user is more and more a producer as well as a consumer demands a new paradigm where everyone can participate given that it is easier and cheaper to produce and distribute news with an increasing number of news outlets such as citizen journalism. Despite the good that comes with citizen journalism not all actors are thrilled with it as observed by Ford (2010) who reports that the traditional media views people who produce news and analysis outside of traditional media organisations as incapable of producing the same news as professional journalists. He adds that they often point to the lack of gatekeepers who are able to edit and fact-check their work, as well as the fact that amateurs who are not being paid a salary for their writing are not able to spend the time necessary for doing the in-depth investigate reporting and analysis that paid journalists are able to.

It is now common place for media outlets like the New vision and Daily Monitor to feature blogs on their websites to allow for the flow of stories across numerous modalities. They have also embraced social media by inviting readers, listeners or viewers to follow their activities on Facebook or Twitter. These platforms are used to make readers aware of the news content in the publications. They also provide real time updates on unfolding events in the country and are very popular with the young segment of the population. Social media has also helped citizens and media actors to circumvent state control, interference and intimidation that is rife as observed by Naturinda & Butagira (2010), who reports that the banning, harassment and intimidation of the press and closure of media houses has greatly infringed freedom of expression. In May 2013 when Monitor Publications was shut down the media continued reporting and providing news

updates on its social media accounts of Facebook, twitter and website. This shows that police cordoning off a media house's premises may shut down the printing press but not its operations in the virtual world.

Other non-media players such as Civil Society have emerged to disseminate information and fill the void left by traditional media and are doing so with great effect. In Uganda Parliamentary Watch a Civil Society entity has mainly used social media platforms such as Facebook and twitter to provide information on Parliamentary processes and increasing the transparency, responsiveness, and accountability of Parliament. This entity has become the undisputed source of news on parliamentary activities and information from its platforms in that information from its accounts is picked up by the major news agencies in the country. In the words of Freer (2007, p. 101): "the biggest challenge currently facing news media firms is the changing means of distribution of news through the new media platforms of the internet and telephony which deliver news, blogs, text alerts, news updates, podcasts and user-generated content to 'consumers' at a greater pace, in more accessible formats and when consumers demand them". Newspapers are being forced by readers' use of the internet to change and adapt their content, style and design. It is worth noting that failure to embrace this change will render the traditional media irrelevant and extinct. It remains to be seen whether social media will remain a place of freedom.

2.0 Conclusion

Social media users like newspaper readers know as observed by Stoker (1999) that all newspapers are at times inaccurate or else select, interpret, and at times distort the events they report. Some newspapers like social media will publish what amounts to little more than barefaced lies. However despite this challenge social media enables access to knowledge and provides and creates fresh opportunities for organizations, communities and individuals (e.g. blogs, podcasts).Social media has given voice to news and opinions that are often ignored by mainstream media that is largely state controlled .Social media has also been instrumental in highlighting human rights violations by state machinery especially the police and in helping citizens and media actors to circumvent state control, interference and intimidation. Its independence and popularity was further strengthened by reports that Facebook had turned down requests by Government of Uganda for information on accounts. Its growth and popularity is even more vivid when one compares the circulation statistics of the major dailies and the likes on

their Facebook pages and the followers on their twitter accounts. Daily Monitor's circulation figures of 30,000 copies for instance pale in comparison to the 100,000 likes on their Facebook page. For as long as it maintains the features of openness, interactivity, participatory and user-centered activities social media will remain a force to reckon with in news conveyance.

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