

How social media stole the public's voice

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Mainstream media in Kenya - still widely consumed, relatively trusted and somewhat 'captured' - is increasingly using social media to source its content instead of using traditional interactions with the 'random man on the street'. Twitter, for example, has become the preferred measure of public opinion.

While trending topics are an indicator of what the public thinks, they only tell a (small) part of often multifaceted stories. Social media platforms, especially Twitter, still remain a playground of the vocal minority, dominated by influencers, and woefully unrepresentative of the general public.

Social platforms were meant to disrupt and replace the old news model and to diversify news content by empowering people to directly and collectively hold power to account. In most cases they have helped to do just that, but the platforms have also become a nefarious tool used to reinforce harmful structures and practices of legacy media that ultimately are detrimental to democracy.

The people formerly known as the audience

The absence of gatekeepers has also made social platforms safe spaces for misinformation and disinformation, allowing politicians to manipulate public opinion using influencers, trolls and bots. These views, often unvetted, get amplified in mainstream media.

The convergence of politically-driven media ownership in Kenya and the media's business interests - which is heavily dependent on state advertising - makes the media susceptible to political influence. The media therefore produces journalism that is carefully curated to avoid harming its business interests, which means that self-censorship is increasingly common and glaring. However, media segmentation - mostly brought about by the internet and accelerated by social media platforms - has

provided alternative sources of news.

The people formerly known as the audience, as media scholar Jay Rosen calls them, have also become content producers. They publish unfiltered content, as they see it, in an effort to uncover truth hidden by legacy media. This new digital information ecosystem means that audiences increasingly believe that legacy media only publish or broadcast filtered versions of a story, and therefore feel that it's their role to sleuth and parse these clues, and determine the full story.

Vulnerable

Interactions on social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have also helped to create accidental communities and complex networks. They are often tenuous yet they are nimble and effective in helping people rally to causes that shape and influence governance in a country like Kenya.

Discussions in these digital town halls have often led to offline action. A recent example is an online campaign that forced the Kenyan government to publish detailed plans on its strategy to fight the Covid-19 outbreak.

However, social media networks pushing to improve governance have often crumbled because of a lack of structures to support the movement. There is also an absence of leaders to provide vision, and day-to-day strategic guidance.

Influencers, frequently the accidental leaders of these movements, are often not driven by altruistic motives but by a selfish goal to acquire followers and monetise their contribution. There are many examples of causes that have lost steam because an influencer has been compromised. Aware of the vulnerabilities of social platforms, politicians increasingly prefer using social media to shape public opinion of them instead of giving interviews to journalists. They feel that they

don't have to explain themselves to the media if they have tweeted or posted on Facebook. This means that they cannot be held to account, a situation that is detrimental to democracy.

The way forward

'A lot of the metrics that we [the media] are trying to chase are the same metrics that trolls use and look for: Attention, audience, and likes. We are modelling an identical behaviour,' says Andrew Losowsky from the Coral Project, an initiative that helps journalists to work better with the communities they serve.

In an article last year, Jennifer Brandel, from the community engagement consultancy Hearken, argued that fundamental changes are needed in order for the media to become more relevant to today's audiences. Her consultancy advocates the concept of People Powered Journalism, which encourages partnership with the public throughout the reporting process, resulting in stories that better meet the audience's needs.

This type of pivot could ensure that the media and audiences partner in the reporting process. Together they could build a bulwark that protects, defends and repulses threats to democratic systems. The media should do this not only because it's the right thing to do, but because their businesses depend on it.

Trust is built on good relationships after all.

References

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