Chapter 3
New Media in Kenya:
Putting Ethnicity in Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The way the media processes, frames, and passes on information either to the government or to the people affects the function of the political system. This chapter discusses the interaction between new media and ethnicity in Kenya, Africa. The chapter investigates ways in which the new media reinforced issues relating to ethnicity prior to Kenya's 2007 presidential election. In demonstrating the nexus between new media and ethnicity, the chapter argues that the upsurge of ethnic animosity was chiefly instigated by new media's influence. Prior to the election, politicians had mobilized their supporters along ethnic lines, and created a tinderbox situation. Thus, there is need for the new media in Kenya to help the citizens to redefine the status of ethnic relationships through the recognition of ethnic differences and the re-discovery of equitable ways to accommodate them; after all, there is more strength than weaknesses in these differences.

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent shift from traditional media to new media may not, on its own account, cause instant ripples in the media industry. However, to ignore this as a normal takeover would be to misread what is in no doubt a move indicative of more fundamental shifts in media. Digital technology such as Mobile phones and the Internet have simply not been around long enough in Kenya, Africa. However, incidents like the 2007-2008 crises in Kenya provide a flash of insight into the emerging power of these tools. It also puts into sharp focus the power new media technologies give citizens of developing nations to report news and organize responses to crisis situations. While Kenyan

journalists and community organizers have a great deal to be proud of in their response to an electoral crisis and the concomitant ethnic violence, new media was also used both by the government and civilians to amplify tensions and coordinate violent attacks (see Goldstein and Rotich, 2008). Significantly, the ease in communication and dissemination of information provided by these digitally networked technologies is vital as digital tools can help promote transparency. Research findings reveal that new media commands 48 percent of the audience share dwarfing the old media (Synovate, 2009 cited in Ogola, 2009).

The term 'new media' is used in this chapter to mean the emergence of digital, computerized or networked information and communication technologies in the latter part of the 20th century. New media often have the characteristic of being manipulatable, networkable, dense, compressible and interactive.

The chapter identifies the specific ways in which new media contributed to negative ethnicity and particular emphasis is given to the role of the social media such as the internet and mobile computing which enables what Bayne (2008) refers to as 'different kinds of communication' than their analog antecedents. Bayne (2008: 43) writes, 'the first element is the shift from a hub-and-spoke architecture with unidirectional links to the end points in the mass media, to distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes in the networked information environment. The second is the practical elimination of communications costs as a barrier to speaking across associational boundaries.' In other words, digital technologies are tools that, in addition to allowing communication in the traditional one-to-one fashion, also allow us to become our own broadcasters and reach large numbers of people in unprecedented ways at trivial cost. Viewed through this lens, actual activities of the new media and ethnicity prior, during and after the election violence witnessed in Kenya are alluded to. Among the questions investigated are: what was the impact

of digital technology on ethnicity prior to, during and after the 2007/2008 post election violence in the Kenyan context? To what extent did the new media contribute to fanning ethnicity in Kenya? What was the impact of this digital technology on ethnicity? The chapter also gives a theoretical and conceptual treatment of new media and ethnicity. The chapter rests on the premise that while digital tools can help promote and strengthen ethnicity, they can also increase the ease of promoting hate speech and ethnic divisions. It is also the argument of this chapter that access to new media in Kenya is critical. As our analysis shows, social media can be an alternative medium for citizen communication or participatory journalism.

2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Recently in Kenya, there has been a massive expansion of Internet infrastructure and a mushrooming of digital technologies, all geared towards informing, entertaining and educating the citizenry. Mobile phones, the Internet and other digital avenues constitute an important outreach agent through which the public is sensitized on issues such as ethnicity, negative ethnicity and political ideologies. The numerous reports by national and international organizations that document the threatening atmosphere and ethnic violence before, during, and after the 2007 election all mention new media having fanned the flames of ethnic hatred, and the role of hate speech as a feature of the conflict (see Bayne 2008; European Union (EU) 2008; Kenya National Commission of Human Rights (KNCHR) 2007- 2008). The distressing conclusion of many of the reports is that some instances of ethnic based violent behavior were likely motivated by encounters with hate speech in the form of text messages, e-mails and blogs (new media). Many people relied on such information that was transmitted by these digital devices and often acted according to their interpretation of the same (KNHCR, 2008: 18).

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