



The Voice of the Youth and Ethical Challenges Using New Media For Dialogue

Katutura Multi-Purpose Centre

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Thanks to Affirmative Repositioning (AR) for inviting me to speak on this very important topic of the voice of the youth and ethical challenges using new media online. This is a huge topic, and I can't cover all angles, but I'll start with some general observations about social media and ethical challenges, and then move more specifically to some thoughts about online Namibia.

Before I get going, I'd like to pose a few questions to you all.

1. Is there anyone here who is not on one or other form of social media?
2. Could I get an indication of where you source most of your information or news:
 - Print?
 - Television or radio?
 - Facebook?
 - Twitter?
 - Whatsapp?
3. Could I then ask you what you view as the most reliable/trusted source for your information needs?
 - Newspapers?
 - Television or radio?
 - Facebook?
 - Twitter?
 - Whatsapp?

This feedback, I believe, illustrates the importance of the conversation we're having here tonight and that a majority of youth are online.

It may be pertinent to this discussion to make mention of an AfricaCheck survey conducted in Kenya ahead of elections in August. AfricaCheck is a fact-checking website, good to follow in this era of fake news.

A recent May survey polled a nationally representative sample of 2000 Kenyans on the impact of fake news in the upcoming election and the outcome showed that more than a third believed that widespread fake news was denying them the information needed to make an informed vote in the August polls.

The data is interesting. Nearly half of the respondents, 49%, said they received news on the election via social media, with Whatsapp proving the most popular among Kenyans across all age groups.

I won't go into all the detail of the survey, but it is important to note that information from friends and family, community leaders and blogger websites was among the least trusted, even though it was most used. In what should be good news for the traditional media, namely radio, TV and newspapers, these had the highest levels of trust, hampered mainly by their low reach.

Why does all this matter? Because an informed and discerning citizenry is as vital to Namibia's democracy as it is for Kenya. If people consume mostly fake news, unverified rumour, gossip and disinformation, they will conceivably make wrong decisions.

As we continue this discussion, we must keep in mind at all times how quality news and information is not only critical to the development of the youth, most importantly, but can also play a transformational role in societies.

I must declare my interests in social media from the outset. I'm a news junkie, so I feed off a variety of media, but I feel it's important to limit my presence online, or risk missing out on the real world. I'm not on Facebook for this and other reasons – although most people tell me I should be – but as many of you know I do enjoy Twitter and feel it can be a very important tool for activism and change, as well as for protest, and the organization and mobilization of citizen voices.

The internet in general holds immense power and potential for the acquisition of knowledge and learning. It can be a supplementary resource for deficiencies in our education system. It is also an important tool for activism, for thoughtful commentary and conversation if only it was mostly being used that way.

COMMUNICATION OVERLOAD

In this digital era of smartphones and the proliferation of social media, many suffer from communication overload. In an article in Salon, Angelo Young says that while social media has its benefits, it's also dumbing down ways in which people communicate with one another.

Not that many years ago digital access for most was limited to a single email account, texting was expensive and mobile phones were used mainly for calls. If I look even further back in time, we had access only to landline phones, telegrams and the telex machine. Today, it's very different. Studies in the US have shown that most youth have a number of social media accounts and several email addresses and they're online for much of the time.

Communication and access was nothing then like it is today and on the African continent, mobile growth in particular, has been huge.

Again according to Young, "having so many channels of communication has overwhelmed our ability to thoughtfully interact online, encouraging cheap and easy forms of communication. Instead of taking the time to formulate a thoughtful reply to an online friend's social media post, users tend to gravitate to using an emoji or firing off a brief comment meant to convey little more than acknowledgement".

To "like" something, for example on Facebook, takes minimal cognitive effort, according to Larry Rosen, who co-authored the book "The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a Hi-Tech World". FB, according to a study by scientists and researchers at

Cornell University, “nudges you towards shallow, happy thoughts that can be turned into advertising dollars”.

So how can youth improve the quality of their social media communications?

A psychology professor at California State recommends that you focus on the people whose so-called social capital has most value to you. Decide what you want to use social media for, and define where you want to amass your social capital. People use these various platforms for different reasons, some just to socialize and keep tabs on friends and family. Others, and I include myself in this group, prefer not to put my private life online, but enjoy more thoughtful, mainly issue-based engagement. If you're one of these social media users, then the professor suggests it is advisable to cut down on your social media accounts, cull those you follow, and be more thoughtful about the content you share.

What are some of the questions youth need to be asking themselves in this discussion?

Among others:

- How do youth think about their own privacy and that of others as they post photos and comments on social media?
- To what extent do they think about the ethical dimensions of the digital content that they share, whether music, text or video?
- How do they respond to routine displays of disrespect and incivility that characterizes the dialogue in many online spaces?

Several studies conducted on these questions have shown that although there are morally and ethically sensitive approaches to online life among youth, that these are often overshadowed by what academic Carrie James called “troubling blind spots, mindful disconnects and deeply individualistic approaches to using the internet. In short, while youth are perpetually wired and connected, their online situations can often be glaringly disconnected from their ethical dimensions ... and youth, also adults for that matter, are often not aware of the potentially far-reaching implications of the things they post and circulate online”.

Mentorship is as important to youth online as it is offline. There needs to be more conversation at schools and community level to promote media literacy. A study found that where parents are involved in influencing the online life of their children, that mostly the advice was confined to safety issues, or “stranger danger”, as it is termed. Seldom did the guidance include questions of ethics.

James advises that parents:

- encourage their children to show empathy and respect for others, and also to embody other aspects of moral thinking
- remind children and youth that they are part of larger communities and that their choices can have effects, even if they're not seen directly.
- Enforce digital ‘time-outs’ for reflection on some of these issues.
- Parents can also point to inspiring examples of digital citizenship, and in so doing they may cultivate ethical behaviour.

Another question we need to give more thought to is the connection between speech and violence. While we may believe the adage ‘sticks and stones may break my

bones, but words can never harm me', in fact they can. Words can be hateful, inciteful and intimidating.

Hiding behind screens, with anonymity at times, can result in the proliferation of cruelty, bullying, gender extremism, hate speech, racism and other evils, and of course promote the spread of fake news.

There are powers and responsibilities which come with the use of new media.

It's not just about journalists anymore. Most young people are involved in media in one way or another, and whereas journalism has its checks and balances, it is important that anyone posting online does their own verification and most importantly, as I always say "think before they post".

Your digital footprint is there always. You may delete, but you don't really. The internet has a long memory. And it doesn't forget. Recently, Donald Trump's new Communications Director, Anthony Scaramucci, who had been a critic of the US President at one time, deleted all his anti-Trump tweets. This action served only to fuel accusations of hypocrisy and for his supposedly deleted tweets to come back at him with a vengeance.

I recently did a small survey among my followers on Twitter, asking whether your social media account speaks to your character. Most agreed that it did. Only a few said they could say what they liked and nobody could or should judge them for it. But like it or not, your social media presence IS being scrutinized by prospective employers, the people around you, and even members of the wider global community, and you need to be accountable for what you post.

It is human to make mistakes. We all do. But when it happens, own them and resolve to be more careful in future. We all know of by now famous examples of those who have tweeted or posted thoughtless comments hurtful to others, and which have caused harm not only to those around them, but also impacted negatively on their own careers and reputations. The now-infamous case of Justine Sacco is only one example. This senior executive, before boarding a plane to South Africa, tweeted: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get Aids. Just kidding. I'm white". By the time she landed, a global Twitterstorm had erupted over her offensive utterances, and she'd already lost her job and her reputation was in tatters. She later apologized but the damage was done. French President Macron recently caused a furore with what most saw as a racist tweet when he described Africa's problems as 'civilisational' in that women had 7 to 8 kids. South Africa's Helen Zille ruined what was a long life of activism and politics by tweeting that colonialism wasn't all bad. But things are not always as they seem, either. A recent uproar in South Africa over a tweet comparing black babies to dogs and which caused an outcry about racism was in fact authored by a black woman. As someone has said, "What happens on social media stays on Google for good".

These examples shouldn't not cause a dampener on rights to free expression online. Everyone should be free to exercise their opinions and views, but it is important to be circumspect about what you read and what you believe, and when you post, to do so with sensitivity for the feelings of others, or pay the price.

A Unesco initiative on youth and the internet seeks to "empower youth to leverage the influential role of information and communication technologies and networks to promote harmonious, inclusive and equitable participation on line and off line in pluralistic societies". It reaffirms the decisive role of values, knowledge and skills that

strengthen respect for human rights, social justice, mutual understanding and contribute to sustainable development and peace.

So to sum up, a few key points and some advice on how to get the best out of social media based on some of my observations of Namibian youth online:

- Always know your rights on and offline and be vigilant about their possible erosion. In Namibia – so far – we are free to express ourselves. These freedoms in other parts of Africa, as you all know, are frequently under threat or even completely denied. In countries like Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, DRC, Cameroon, etc the internet has been shut down by governments for often spurious reasons, thereby silencing citizens during key periods like elections. And if not shutdowns, there are constant threats to regulate social media. Zimbabwe is one country, Nigeria is another. Namibia too. We have to resist government attempts to legislate regulation of off or online media in order to silence political dissent and criticisms. There are adequate laws already in place to deal with contraventions where they occur. So we can't take our freedoms for granted. There are always those who would curtail them, even in a country which is regarded as first in press freedom on the continent. It will take work and advocacy to keep it that way. Unfortunately, campaigns for freedom of speech and expression are often seen as belonging to the media. It's a huge mistake. Citizens in general must take ownership of these campaigns because in the end, it's about their rights first and foremost. In Namibia, the Namibia Media Trust, as a member of Action Namibia coalition, has taken an active role in promoting a progressive Access to Information law to enable an informed citizenry and thereby a knowledge-based society, so important for the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs. Why is such access important? Because the public needs proper information to be engaged and critical thinkers and participants in national life, and the media too must have access to inform people to the best of their journalistic ability. We're also monitoring bills like the Cybersecurity law to ensure that rights are not eroded in the process of their formulation. And right now one of the aspects we're protesting is a provision that entitles government agents to enter your property without warrant and confiscate your computer. The broader public, including the youth, are too often apathetic or disinterested in these campaigns on issues that may impact their rights negatively. And by the time they wake up, it may be too late. So I would encourage youth to get behind these campaigns to ensure an enabling environment for the exercise of our rights.
- I also urge youth to think about the purpose behind your online presence and profile. I regularly look at the profiles of Namibian youth on Twitter, read their tweets and check who and what they follow. Mostly they talk among themselves and follow one another as well as some local personalities, but mostly foreign celebrities whose lives seem to interest them most. But a lot of the exchanges are superficial and there's not a lot of substance out there. As I've said, different people are online for different reasons, and it's your right to follow the Kardashians and be frivolous and superficial online if that's what does it for you. But the huge potential to meet the challenges facing our country and the wider global community are wasted in the process. If it's to keep tabs on family and friends, that's also fine, but be aware of issues of privacy and remember that your posts may reach a wider audience than those for which they're intended. A single mother acquaintance of mine was horrified when her son did a

walkabout in their home, taking a video and posting it online. She knew that a home invasion could be the result.

- Think about not only what you say, but who you follow and what you retweet or onpass. Do your own checks and verification. There's a lot of rubbish out there. You don't want to be an accomplice to the spread of fake news or hate speech and disinformation or become unwitting trolls. If I'm unsure about something, I will usually check the profile of the person who tweeted and/or verify the information separately before I pass it on. Be skeptical and be careful of anonymous accounts. People who use them are usually less caring about what they post than those who use their real names. In Namibia it would seem to me there is no need for such anonymity, which is more understandable in societies under siege. Most of you would want to build your own brand in terms of your own passions and what you do in life, whether you're a musician or an artist or an accountant or an activist. And like it or not, people judge you based on what you post, so think before you do so about possible consequences for yourself and others. You are what you share. Post good content. (And for heavens sake, don't drunk tweet! I've seen some really horrible late-night posts from people who haven't got their wits about them).
- It's important for the youth to develop ethical sensibilities when posting online and to realise that my rights end where yours begin. Use the mantra of 'do unto others as you would have done unto you' if you prefer. Our Constitution and more especially our Bill of Rights can be your guide. Make sure to read the recently re-formulated Code of Ethics for Namibian media, by the Namibia Editors Forum with the assistance of the Namibia Media Trust. I have a few copies with me for distribution but you can also access it on The Namibian's website. This code doesn't just apply to traditional journalists but to everyone who posts online. It will also help you, the public, hold the media to account.
- Social media, Twitter hashtags in particular, can be a great tool for social protest. There've been one or two cases where this has happened locally. The 'no to the new parliament' demonstrations were largely triggered online and this helped stave off a lavish expenditure. AR makes use of new media around the issues of land and plots. But there are so many more worthy causes, and not only political ones, that can and should be embraced by the youth to push for change in several sectors. A while back I tried to start the ball rolling on the need to ban plastic bags to protect our environment, but youth weren't interested and it didn't catch on. Our President, and a number of our politicians are on Twitter, and we should make use of the opportunities we have to engage them in areas of good governance and development priorities and hold them to account. A group in the US called The Resistance Party, has started an anti-Trump hashtag protest on Twitter with regard healthcare and already thousands have responded by calling senators on the numbers that have been provided. There are many other social movements closer to home.

Finally, it may sound like I'm painting a rather depressing picture of social media. That is not my intent. Social media can be very informative, interesting, interactive and even fun. But overall I like the concept of social media for social good and I think Namibians could get their voices out there and make a difference with a little more effort. In the online context, social media has such great potential to help build a better country. And why stop there? Let's help create a good and more informed world too.

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