Interrogating Online Communication ethical practices in Kenya: the case of the League of Young Professional Website and Blog

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**Introduction**

The emergence of virtual communities & collaborative environments has provided online participants the opportunity to play the role of the ‘pro-sumer’: the publisher, the broad or narrowcaster, editor, content developer and ‘journator’ (Journalist on the net) and commentator of issue of individual and of public interest. Emerging electronic communities on the web enable members to create, increase or renew their social capital in powerful virtual extended social networks that are esteem boosters; provide a sense of belonging and recognition of E-participants; and create opportunities for new skills that facilitate for ego-building and self-actualization.

The E-participant gains instant gratification and approval from others on publishing their work online as this is an opportunity to showcase their expertise or to make recommendations through offering solicited or unsolicited advice to other in the network. Their participation online is guided by ego-driven motivation to establish themselves as authorities in a given subject and hence builds reputations as legitimate writers who accumulate the goodwill and trust of other in the network.

E-participants enter into dialogue online to vent emotions and also build a reputation through articulating their concerns online. Like-minded people come online to share similar interests; feed others with their observations; virtually meet people and connect deeply with the happenings in their daily lives and still have insight into global social worlds. In this era of information overload, online participants turn to virtual sources to make sense out of
compressed views and judgments in a bid to understand what stands as the truth about an issue.

Online sources can further be described as a source of ‘inexpensive production of news, information and advice that lacks in mainstream media. Social dialogue on what is rare, obscure or controversial is freely accessed online due to the tipping-effect through the ‘mavens’ and ‘connectors’ proposed by Malcolm Gadwell in his book the ‘Tipping Point’. Mavens are information brokers who aggressively collect information, share and trade in knowledge while ‘connectors’ are socially motivated to bring people they know from diverse backgrounds together.

The motivation to create online is because of easy access to virtual spaces where they can express their feelings, opinions and showcase their views. These virtual spaces offer distractions from day-to-day life activities hence a vista to entertain and be entertained. Content may be novel, trendy and give cultural status to aspects otherwise considered of little value. The web, unlike in the mainstream media, does not always provide pre-packaged information that cannot be in contest. The E-participant is allowed to debate, question or learn online. Through ‘particainment’ they can disagree or agree; laugh or scorn; compare and contrast; gain new knowledge and connect with others for a common purpose or enterprise.

Not only can audiences engage in the discourse on issues of personal, group and national concerns online, but also can report, analyze, disseminate news and information to their friends and peers. Weblogs are today a vista for participatory journalism as patterned in the olden days
of the profession. In fact, access to that information is not restricted to the website only but to emails and other social media sites especially Facebook and Twitter.

Weblog communities engage in civic journalism that creates dialogue and conversation on issues that affect their day to day without the high degree of central control in the exchange of communication. People discuss political lifestyle issues, relationships, policy issues without feeling inhibited or censored. The flow of communication is for all to see and their input public scrutiny and involvement.

Just like the way mainstream Journalism operates within a network of relationship with public sources and consumers of information, E-participants also relies on building relationship based on trust and those that invokes the notion of public interest and still their own needs. Citizen journalism is believed to have spurred due to the availability of new media platforms like mail-list, forms, weblogs, wikis, programmes, short messaging services and mobile connected cameras. Other vistas include internet broadcast; peer to peer sharing of files; Really Simple Syndication (RSS). These help in organizing access of content to that is of interest to the users.

The online communication experience has created the ‘cyberspere’ which is a neutral space where rational and usually ‘male-dominated’ public deliberations take place (Habermas 1989). The ‘blogosphere’ has triggered the global citizens participation in the cyberspace without inhibitions of geographical, racial, cultural or gender barriers.

Citizen journalism provides citizens who take the initiative space to report news or express views about their organizations and daily life occurrences. They are freelancing citizen reports not constrained by journalistic processes with little editorial oversight. They gather, process,
research, report, analyze and publish the news and information using technology online (Ross, & Cormier 2010:16). This, in turn, provides a forum for democratic citizenship through the use of democratic rituals to modern conventional media and journalism as it provides a forum for a people centred, largely outline, movement of the so called ‘we-the-media’ (2006)

Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1963) in coming up with the Libertarian Theory of the press assert that the underlying purpose of the mass media is to help discover truth, to assist in the process of solving political and social problems through the provision of space to present evidence and opinion that guide and prompt new thinking on issues of public interest decisions. Today, due to technological advances, E-participation enables citizens to return to this earlier era in journalism which was perceived as a marketplace of ideas and this theory idealizes and provides a philosophical basis for the on-going, three-way relationship between the news media, government and society as showcased in the United States. The theory seeks to maximize freedom of the press both for the news media and the public (Napoli, 2001)

While mainstream media is structured around sources of news that people are basically in power (Galtung & Ruge 1969), citizen journalism empowerment the citizen into having self-efficacy in making their contribution to in the dialogue about issues that are of national interest. The latter is guided by profit seeking motives while the former allows for the participation of ordinary people-de-institutionalizing and de-professionalizing the practice of journalism and hence enhances democratic participation.

Albeit the tendency of those in mainstream media underestimate the value of participatory journalism because it is driven by amateurs, they ignore the psychological value associated with
the creative process that the individual engages in. the value of e-participation is in the ability to be in the heart of self-driven, self-seeking and self-esteem motivations to articulate messages designed by individual. Just as seen with mainstream media,

However, the glossy picture painted about E-participation is not devoid of the lack of fair play and ethical misconduct online. Some contributors may perform pranks, manipulate rules, spread falsehood, rumours and frame others and hence infringing on other people’s rights. Rules therefore are a pre-requisite to inculcate the culture of respect and discipline online and discourage impunity online so that the virtual experience is worthwhile.

In this paper, I have undertaken to interrogate the presence of or lack of code of Ethics that guide the operations of the League of Young Professionals website (LYP). LYP website was created by as an offshoot from Bidii Afrika which later reinvented itself to Walalahoi how banned weblog. The League of Young Profession inherited membership from various contact listings they had access to previously, in the present time has members who mainly receive emails in their email inboxes. LYP is established as a google group account and members initiate points of discussion through email to enlisted members who may be interested in contributing to stories until it is killed.

**The Case of the League of Young Professionals-Kenya**

In 2008, soon after the break off from Bidii Afrika, the League of Young Professionals-Kenya (LYP) isolated those they considered were of shared aspiration to have social discourse on what they considered as developmental issues of common interest. Members were cautioned against encouraging political debates that would be considered offensive by membership who
play ‘the big brother’ role in the website. A constitution by a selected membership that formed a committee was shared online with focus on professional development.

Message types on this weblog are about sharing career opportunities, property owning ventures and reading material for personal growth and development. Advertisements were to be paid for at the cost of one thousand per month. Website E-books that especially support MBA education or as motivational books are sold on the website.

On inquiring from the moderator Francis Kuria Mwangi on the issue of filtering of content, he intimated that all messages tend to go through his perusal and he normally uses his own discretion to decide what is not should not be published.. For the rest of the shared content, the use of ‘publish, then filter’ principle is used. Participants in the community say what they have to say and with the use of what is referred to as ‘editorial judgment’ information is sorted out based on what is considered as mediocre after the fact. This approach is considered the most democratic way to encourage conversation that involves high-tech interaction as was in original journalism in public houses and coffee houses many years ago.

In the new media ecosystem, online communities discuss and extend personal or media disseminated stories. In this ecosystem, the moderator recognizes that even readers know a lot and this can be an opportunity to teach. In LYP, members are allowed to contribute as much as they wish to a proposed issue of discussion. The length of this mediated discussion is determined by the interest in the initial post on a particular issue.

With the existence of communities on the net, Multi-stakeholderism on internet governance has emerged guided by the Geneva Principles and the Internet Bills of Right. The Geneva
Principles proposes the concept of good faith, fairness and equal treatment. Internet communication should not be censored and should allow for inclusion diversity and pluralism. LYP demonstrates this principle as it allows an individual to take the ‘pro-sumer’ role, engage audience in an issue of concern in the privacy of their emails. Pluralism is exhibited by contributions to that discussion.

The Internet Bills of Right advocates for the democratization of access of the internet and people centered communication. The landscape, which in this case, is synonymous with that of the media ecosystem, needs to promote strengthening of communication for sustainable development that facilitates for human rights and social justice.

In allowing for pluralistic voices on issues discussed on LYP helps the members feel that their view is important, it is respect and is portrayed in a safe haven to air their ideas without inhibitions. Based on this internet community believe in connectivity with no need for filtering, authentication and protocol that censor communication hence compromising on the principle of neutrality.

From the perspective above, the League of Young Professional weblog promotes the values to pluralism and allows for diversity in person, and in the production of voice for all in the community. With little of the ‘filter then publish approach’ used in main stream media, members of LYP generally are at will to contribute to key discussions, initiate discussion, correct perspective that can build or kill a story. Members are quick to note and discourage and flows of discussion or better still ask for the intervention of the moderator of LYP to ensure that communication from the offending participant is blacklisted on their recommendation. This can
be considered democracy, fairness and justice in decision making on mechanism that guide the operation of the weblog.

Members of LYP can attest to the fact that engaging in this forum gives them status, reputation and social recognition as valuable members of this community. The website is also a chance to connect with people who have similar interests online and off without geographical boarders. Interaction on the net empowers members of the community gain knowledge and understanding about their circumstances. With mainstream media providing information for the elite, the weblog provides a forum for sense making among peers giving the users a variety of perspective to use to inform their attitude and belief.

From the weblog, users meet connectors and mavens (Gladwell 2000) that provides a vista to join a wide array of relevant networks and provide a reserve of information available on pressing a button online. Community members wish to entertain and be entertained in a creative manner. On the weblog, the rules of engagement need to accommodate balance between the group and the individual. Rules are defined by the social software on which the community participates as it allows for editorial judgment that gives ‘pro-sumers’ the power to expand or kill content shared in the network.

Members only access the website through registration that defines the criteria for registration. The contributions shared online pass through a moderator who act as appointed person who police the flow of information. It is however left to his personal discretion or accumulated complaints and requests to discourage and delete content that is offensive or obscene in their eyes.
Recommendations

As a measure of recommendation for the LYP website blog, there is a need to develop a reputation system that collects, aggregate feedback about participant’s behavior. Ranking and Rating of content is another method to grade content and producers as being favourable to the taste of community.

The community can also appoint meter moderators who give periodic assessment of the community’s activities and determine the existence of appropriate roles played by web community members. This exercise can help need out members with self-interest who try to disrupt the community from its goal and aspirations.

Another method includes using votes, citations and references to pages to access the credibility of content. This method is greatly by Google to access website credibility. ‘Blogrolls’ which link hyperlinks with websites carrying similar subject and that are indicated as like by many website visitors. For researchers, the use of cross linkages that indicate the number of times content has been cited.

Other variables that basically can be used to create an ethical online participatory experiences include creating intrinsic feelings of egalitarianism where people fill that they share collective goals to promote common good. Trust is further established when an individual can share personal intimate information with others online and the ability to engage others in an activity, they passionately feel about. Trust is further enhanced by having speedy connections that enables quick responses to meet the communication needs of others. This creates a sense of
reliance in spite of distance and this satisfies the internal accountability system an individual holds to allow being vulnerable to others in trust.

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