

Countering the New Media Podia: Youth and ‘Fake News’ in Kenya

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Abstract

The rise of fake news into the new media platform has raised significant concern in Africa and Kenya in recent years. The new media has embedded itself with fake news, which sometimes has led to the misunderstanding and misinformation of particular events that might be of the public interest. The general public, policymakers, and scholars, as well as the media, have found this as a very challenging issue. The upsurge of the new technologies, mainly social media, has posed challenges as youth immerse themselves in utilizing these social media for their own benefits. This is coupled with the creation and spreading of fake news, which sometimes when it goes viral; they lead to stress, panic and uncertainty to the individuals that come across them. The ability of users’ exceptional capacity to produce, reproduce, and distribute their information to a broad audience makes social media, an essential tool in the information age. The article critically reviews the literature on fake news and recommends for media literacy, strengthening the legal structures and use of sophisticated technologies as a strategy to fight fake news in the social media in Kenya.

Keywords: Fake news, New media, Social media, Youth, Media literacy, Kenya

Introduction

As fake news gains popularity, so is the social media in our overall daily lives. In the current 21st century, information spreads using various social media platforms. Jumia Mobile Report (2019) asserts that internet penetration in Kenya stands at 84 percent, and a population of about 47.3 million accessing the internet. The internet connectivity and penetration in Africa is 80 per cent, with Kenya contributing to 46.94M (91 percent). Individuals have turned to social media for their social gratification for news, entertainment, research, social interactions, and even business.

Social Media Lab Africa, (2018) show that with the aid of the proliferation of internet-enabled phones, youth in Kenya aged 21-35 years spend at least 3 hours daily on social media. This has led to the rapid development of social networking sites that have reconfigured how youths and groups use and access social media. Doing so, they, therefore, tend to create, share, re-share, and spread information to the interconnected sphere (Ong’ong’a et al., 2017). Some of this information is not verified, and the tendency of misinforming, disinforming, and spread of fake news is always at high stake.

WhatsApp stands at 88.6 percent in Kenya (Social Media Lab Africa, 2018), has become one of the quintessential podia to consume, follow, share and learn the emerging trending news and events happening within the nation and around the world. Fake reports identification from these platforms has proved to be unfruitful as the fast pace of the spread of the information on social media heightens with inaccuracy (Chakrabarti et al., 2018). The danger that this brings is the trust and credibility of the news since the authenticity of them, on many occasions, can be questionable.

Youths in Kenya have continued facing the challenges of spreading unverifiable information using social media, especially the WhatsApp (GeoPoll, 2018). This information is not easily and quickly corrected as they travel far and wide. During natural disasters and violence, videos, pictures, and clips are shared without verification; hence there is a need for an eye witness to ascertain these events. The assessment of the accuracy of the information on WhatsApp has become more challenging for breaking news and proceedings events (Chakrabarti et al., 2018; GeoPoll, 2018; Social Media Lab Africa, 2018). News media in Kenya have relied on the messages created on WhatsApp and other social media for their news feeds. This information appears on these social media much earlier. It is deemed as the source of only available information on that specific time hence posing a challenge of its verification with other sources.

Social media, especially WhatsApp, propagate fake news in Kenya as youth continue to utilize them (Chakrabarti et al., 2018; GeoPoll, 2018; Social Media Lab Africa, 2018). Against this backdrop, this paper analyses how youth use social media.

Trends of Fake News

Fake news is the spread of news like information, which is not factual and correct. Most of the time, it includes part of the real story, which might be twisted to make it clickbait. According to (GeoPoll, 2018) define fake news as false or misleading information published, which could be understood to be authentic news. Fake news witnessed in Kenya circulates majorly during the political period. The heightened media coverage of fake news in Kenya during the election had an impact on the perception of the audience on the effects of fake news (Chakrabarti, et al., 2018). The politician always spread such news or sometimes fall prey. Therefore, fake news in social media has become a double-edged sword. In 2017, for instance, false reports covered in some social media had indicated that the governor of Busia Dr Otuomo had ditched ODM (Orange Democratic Movement) to Jubilee Party. This was created to discredit his nomination.

Furthermore, the defection of wiper leader Mr. Kalonzo Musyoka to the Jubilee party was

widely spread in social media. This information turned out to be fake news going round to spoil his votes. Other individuals who have faced the harsh thrust of fake news have included media personalities and celebrities. Despite this, the second president of Kenya late (Daniel Toroch arap Moi) also found himself within the mixture of fake news, which was published and circulated on the social media that alleged he had passed on. The president had been ailing with frequent medical check-ups. The material described the nature of his 'death' and giving details of a purported letter to be read to Kenyans when he passes on. This elicited some mixed reaction that was widely debated in the Kenyan parliament by the house (Katoo, 2018), which led to the late president's family to discern the information by giving a press statement.

In the 2017 repeated election in Kenya, the IEBC (Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission), a body in charge of overseeing the entire election activities in Kenya, faced the wrath of fake news (Roudik, 2019). Such a large body found itself countering false information on online social platforms. Vital documents like letters and forms, that were proposed to be used by the returning officials circulated widely in social media. The election in any country is an important event, and when mismanaged, could lead to chaos and atrocities bearing in mind within the fluidity of Kenya politics. With different documents bearing the electoral commission logos, forged signatures of officials were shared online, which created doubt of the entire electoral process. Although the commission came out strongly discerning itself from the documents circulating in various platforms, individuals could not believe because of their biases that they emanated from this communicative process.

On 26th November 2019, the BBI (Building Bridges Initiative) false report circulated on social media before it was availed to the public on 27th November 2019 by the president. The BBI is task force formed to come up with the recommendation after the August 2017 repeated election. This led to the main opposition leader to be sworn in parallel to the presidential swearing. The political tension within the country at that time made the leader of the opposition and the seating president to have a

common ground by shaking hand to signify peace. From this handshake, they committed to forming a task force to look into problems that face Kenya in general and come up with possible solutions to those problems.

WhatsApp and other social media were extensively used to spread the fake content on this report. The leadership of the task force came out strongly advising Kenyans to ignore the stories going around social media as fake and should report the same to the authorities. This implied that the political atmosphere in Kenya during that period, were at the brink of the start of 2022 political campaigns. The report, which was meant to unite Kenya if it turns out to be fake and people believed in it, could lead to what happened in 2007-2008, where radio, social media, and text messages were used widely to spread ethnic messages (ARTICLE 19, 2018; GeoPoll, 2018). The eruption of violence in some particular parts of countries led to death, and the displacement of individuals was witnessed.

Material and Methods

The study adopted Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz's 1974 uses and gratification theory to study how youth use social media. The article falls under interpretivism paradigm that believes information can be sourced and analyzed qualitatively from a pool of secondary sources, which include academic journals, newspapers, books and websites. The study purposively searched and critically sampled literary materials published in the last five years related to the area of study.

Results and Discussion

Fake News Emulsification on Internet

In Kenya, social media has become a very crucial tool. These applications are embedded in the different digital technological devices, which might include mobile phones, tablets, computers, and I pads, to mention a few (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019; Ong'ong'a, 2020). Such social media applications include WhatsApp messenger, telegram messenger, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, as well as snapchat. Currently, reports published by (Chakrabarti, et al., 2018; GeoPoll, 2018; Jumia, 2019; NENDO, 2019) indicate that youths in Kenya use these applications

for entertainment, job searching, and creating memes. The population in Kenya is mainly youthful, who stand at about 65 per cent. These groups of people find solace in using social media since the job trends in Kenya are not forthcoming. To keep themselves busy, they tend to create, develop, and share stories, news, and videos through the various social media platforms that they subscribed to (Chakrabarti, et al., 2018; GeoPoll, 2018; Jumia, 2019; Ong'ong'a, et al., 2017).

The youths justified the sharing of fake news in light of not being left behind and hence, being on top of the game (Chakrabarti, et al., 2018). As they seek news for their self-development, they have tended to be seen as individuals who are well conversant, which makes them be acceptable and able to participate in the public debates on issues that matter to them. This has, therefore, led to the sharing and engaging in discussions, deliberately spreading fake news. Youths have seen this as not as harmful as they self- confess (Chakrabarti, et al., 2018; Posetti & Alice, 2018).

Jumia (2019) argues that the topic of discussion among the youth, which is mostly fake news, includes those from the political sphere. During the election seasons, youths in Kenya found themselves surrounded by false information. The differential between incorrect information (Gil de Zúñiga, & Diehl, 2019) and real news has always distracted the youth to participate effectively in the development of the public agenda. For instance, in the 2017 repeated election in Kenya, there were youths majorly tweeting and retweeting political information, which was not verifiable.

Social media inclusively are used by a politician to promote their political ideologies and campaigns (Vosoughi, et al., 2018). Political parties have created several social media groups where they hire youths to spread fake news and defame their political opposition to gain popularity among the electorates. The critical feature of these social media is that one could not reveal the origin of the false information. Politicians have used the youths in Kenya as a stepping stone to spread their political agendas. Most of the information disseminated by the youths is not verifiable while being labelled as fake news.

Recently, there has been an improvement in misinformation and fake news in social media about the Covid-19 in Kenya. For instance, Kenya, like other countries, had to strengthen the laws and regulation on individuals publishing fake news. The recent Twitter message doing round created by 23 years old Kenyan youth (Ong'ang'a, 2020), was alleged by the authorities to be alarming and misleading about COVID-19 in Kenya, is something to be noted with great concern in the digital era.

Regulations of Fake News in Kenya

The news media confidence in Kenya is undermined by fake news. The need for healthy and free media in social media is vital for a stable democracy. The responsibility of stopping the amplification of misleading messages is everyone's business with tight collaboration between different stakeholders, including the media and the public.

Like any other developing country in the world, Kenya has enacted various laws to combat misinformation. The state took this initiative after the vast misinformation in the social media in the country. The Communication Authority of Kenya (CAK) issued guidelines in 2017 that directed the group administrators of the social media to ensure moderation and to regulate unwanted contents (Roudik, 2019). The spread of misleading information on their WhatsApp group warrants for criminal liability in the advent of any harm. They also instructed the service providers of social media to delete accounts that are utilized to disseminate unwanted political materials (Kato, 2018; Roudik, 2019).

The constitution of Kenya categorically stipulates the punishment of perpetrators of the spread of fake news. The Computer Misuse and Cybercrime 2018 law under article 22, which was enacted in May 2018, cites the publication of false and misleading information such; propagation of war and incitement to violence (Communication Authority of Kenya, 2017). Individuals who abuse this law are subjected to a term of ten years imprisonment and or a Ksh.5 million or both. This law implementation is suspended by the Constitutional and Human Rights Division of the Kenya high court after a successful challenged (Roudik, 2019).

The Implication of Fake News on Youth

The youths in Kenya are the biggest consumers of news (Jumia, 2019). Because of their large numbers and techno-savvy characteristics, they have subscribed to various social media platforms. While utilizing these online social media platforms, they tend to consume news that is not verified or that which the facts have not been checked. This, therefore, subjects them to fall prey to the fake news. The spread of unverified information by some youths in Kenya has led them to face legal consequences. For instance, the constant engagement of youth with online social networks has exposed them to unconfirmed information. Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook have been used widely in Kenya to fan violence and political misconduct (GeoPoll, 2018).

Social media messages created and spread by the youths have had an effect of intensifying social conflict that undermines faith in the democratic process by people. Important issues that need to be addressed are distracted by people by the so-called fake news. Such issues may remain unresolved since when an individual consumes information (Bode & Vraga, 2018) from multiple people on social media; they tend to believe those statements (Domingo et al., 2008). Therefore, this undermines the youths in participating in the governance of the country. Hence they are unable to make an important decision that might have a ripple effect on them and the nation at large.

Research Gap & Conclusion

It is inevitable that the youth in Kenya and globally still face the challenges of fake news that are spread on online social platforms, which include WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and others that work in the same way. Therefore, this creates a grey area for the various stakeholders that deal with youth programs to develop development strategies to support them. Such strategies should include media literacy which offers creativity and critical thinking skills, as well as strengthening the legal structures and use of sophisticated technologies like bots to track down fake news in the social media. The host and ownership of these social media platforms should work closely with the relevant government agencies and the media at large to minimize this

plague. Although there has been an improvement in the perception and behaviour of fake news, youths still stand at the crossroad of fake news during the political and campaign periods. The need for social recognition by the use of social media to pursue their agenda is something that various stakeholders could leverage on hence reducing the wide circulation of fake news that can cause nations to collapse.

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