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SOCIAL MEDIA

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In the 2014 Train My Generation survey, the most common source of information for young Africans was the internet and social media, which was more popular than television and newspapers combined. How can we increase the standards and regulation of social media (if it is indeed possible) to ensure that we are receiving accurate and relevant information?

Current situation

The Internet has shifted the speed and quantity of information delivered, transforming the way in which people consume news. Moreover, new media tools including social media have propelled the rise of the citizen journalist. Citizen journalists are defined by the fact that they are unaffiliated with major news outlets. Undoubtedly, this presents both benefits and challenges to newsreaders. Consumers of social media news enjoy immediacy and uncensored content that may not be possible with traditional newspapers faced with editorial oversight. Citizen journalists and readers benefit from the fact that these journalists can circumvent publication biases and any sort of censorship from governments who crack down on mainstream publications. Social media and digitisation also provides anyone with the opportunity to publish. In addition, social media allow for mass mobilisation around issues that capture collective attention. In other words, social media has transformed hitherto passive recipients of news into active consumers, producers, and agenda-setters at the same time.

At the same time, however, there exist several caveats. First, consumers are limited by the fact that many writers and bloggers have not been trained or informed of journalistic standards or ethical codes. Content may be equally as relevant, but with fewer media gatekeepers, it is less regulated and more ubiquitous than in previous generations. Second, responses to the news can vary: from active, mature assertions of "citizen power" including forms of "Internet vigilantism"; to inaction ("clicktivism") whereby consumers of news exhaust their internal socio-political activism by signing online petitions, posting comments and performing other token gestures rather than engaging in meaningful action; to cyber-

bullying or trolling. It also bears mention that the analysis of social media here must occur at two polarised levels; firstly, at local level, many households in Africa have yet to bridge the technological divide, which implies that voices emanating from the ground are likely to be urban, educated (and often male) voices. Secondly, at the global level, social media has gained ground and is being explored as a pathway to social enterprise, wealth creation, knowledge generation and fuel to creative economies. Thus, there is a risk of there being a growing technological divide between the North and the South if we fail to harness the power of social media.

The Challenges of Media in the Digital Age

The Rise of Social Media

Events such as the Arab Spring and campaigns such as the global solidarity around the Occupy Wall Street movement or even the aftermath of the abduction of the Chibok girls or the terrorist attacks on French paper Charlie Hebdo, highlight how irrevocably ingrained social media has become in the global dissemination and absorption of – as well as reaction to – information. The murders of bloggers Avijit Roy, Washiqur Rahman, Ananta Bijoy Das and Niloy Chakrabarti in Bangladesh, with terrorist group Al-Qaeda claiming responsibility for at least one of the murders, tells of one fact: alternative voices on the Internet are now being perceived as a real threat by undemocratic groups; real enough to attempt to silence them in extreme ways.

The social media landscape is shifting and reinventing itself at a rapid pace: from platforms to share and comment on photos, to tools for raising money through crowdfunding; from discussion forums to apps that allow us to geomap events and information in real time; from microblogs to citizen contributions to bigger bodies' blog lists. Through these instruments and platforms, the millennial generation in particular is transferring vast amounts of information. These pieces of information are almost always subjective, whether it is by producing one's own content (for instance through a blog), or by sharing news acquired from pre-existing news sites, along with a caption or comment reflecting one's opinion on the piece.

The volume and type of content created reflects an unprecedented form of social innovation, concomitant with the rise of "citizen power", a growing demand and appetite for "open source data", as well as a desire to participate in and co-create a shared economy. These trends point to the necessity, as McKinsey's Global Insights mention, to endow our social interactions with the "speed, scale and economics of the internet", in order to fully tap the potential of social media. In other words, we have reached a stage where media must adapt, or die. In tandem, institutions have the choice to adapt to the new landscape, or risk losing credibility.

On the one hand, social media has become a sphere for tackling complex global issues and providing alternative narratives. For instance, a [Twitter campaign](#) such as #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou¹ aims to provide a counter-narrative to the hegemonic view of Africa as a hopeless continent. Blogs such as "Africa is not a country" aim to achieve the same aim: providing [alternative voices](#) to the "single story"² told by mainstream media.

At the same time, the use of social media relies on emotive responses and interest, in a context where attention spans are growing ever shorter. Several weeks ago, the murder of Cecil the Lion sparked waves of outrage across the world, prompting people to carry out a virtual and physical witch-hunt for Mr. Walter Palmer, the dentist responsible. Whilst the sentiment behind calling out issues such as trophy hunting and demanding the extradition of Mr. Palmer to Zimbabwe was commendable, the form of internet vigilantism launched by the sharing of information on social media ended up being somewhat reductionist: by focusing exclusively on demonising Mr. Palmer, the sharing of information missed important nuances and conversations around sustainable development, conservation, poverty, post-colonialism, in addition to turning into a campaign of bullying and hate against the dentist, before fizzling out.

The most telling example of the limitations to the use of social media, both as a result of untapped potential and as a result of lack of direction, comes from social media itself. A Reddit user posted the following question: "*If someone from the 1950s suddenly appeared today, what would be the most difficult thing to explain to them about today?*" And the most popular answer, which received thousands of "upvotes" from other Reddit users, captured the pitfalls of social media usage: "*I possess a device, in my pocket that is capable of accessing the entirety of information known to man. I use it to look at pictures of cats and get in to arguments with strangers.*"

Freedom of Expression at a Cost

With the expansion of digital channels operating at faster frequencies, information is sent and received at rapid speeds; more people have access to information than ever before. According to CNBC, Africa has 200 million Internet users, 120 million of which use Facebook. Sub-Saharan Africa still faces a digital divide and Africa's Internet penetration is at 15%, compared to 78.6% for the US and 63.2% for Europe (Elettra Ardissino, *Institute for Public Policy Research*, 2013).

Although Internet connectivity varies by demographic, country and social class, increased access to the Internet via mobile phone or broadband has prompted Africans to turn to the Internet for their news sources. In the 2014 [Train My Generation survey](#), the most common source of information for young

¹ <http://magazine.good.is/articles/africans-post-positive-images-of-continent-combat-media-stereotypes>

² http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

Africans was the Internet and social media, which was more popular than television and newspapers combined. Nielsen conducted a study about African media consumption with several key findings, including the fact that Angola, Namibia, Kenya and Botswana had the greatest likelihood of consuming news on the Internet via social media and digital print publications (*A Nielsen Blueprint for Media Strategies in Africa*, Nielsen Company, 2013).

Historically, African news outlets were limited to television, radio and print, and with specific country exceptions, controlled by the government. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, government radio stations were shut down if they produced programmes critical of its regime (Tara Susman-Pena, *“Healthy Media, Vibrant Societies,”* 2012). Africa’s media ownership landscape has shifted from government-controlled television and radio to more privatised ownership, which the Balancing Act calls liberalised media (*Balancing Act*, 2014).

Balancing Act analysed 48 African countries and noted that only 28 were completely liberalised in 2011. This number increased to 40 by 2014. The liberalisation of media has had widespread implications, including diversification of news sources and prevention of government-issued censorship. Liberal economists and social scientists alike studied the benefits of press freedom on democracies and economies. Adam Smith, for example, thought that societies with greater press freedom and democracies have stronger economies and greater political stability. When media is free and uncensored it is able to hold the government accountable. With social media as an extension of free press, this accountability increases and could be extended to media outlets as well. David Allen Green in the *New Statesman* said: “Social media users can hold politicians and media outlets to account in a manner not possible - or conceivable - until a few years ago. Instead of a politician saying something forgotten the day after, or a reporter's bylined piece being in next day's fish-and-chip paper, those involved in social media can pore over details and make connections weeks and months later.” Indeed, greater press freedom in an age of unrestricted content means there is more information that is potentially inaccurate, propaganda, or is PR or brand marketing. For example, companies are beginning to use tactics like native advertising, which may be misconstrued as news to the untrained reader. The line between types of news-related content and journalism is increasingly difficult to decipher and is posing complex questions about regulation and ethics.

Ethical self-regulation including principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity and fairness, has historically been the professional responsibility of journalists. Beginning in the 1920s, the role of professional associations was to uphold this code of conduct (Puddephatt, Andrew, *“The Importance of Self Regulation of the Media in Upholding Freedom of Expression,”* UNESCO, 2011). However, traditional journalism housed by reputable institutions and legacy media outlets is not immune to inaccurate reporting or breaches of conduct. Despite implied journalistic standards, prestigious media outlets have

had problems with false, hyperbolic or biased reporting. The recent case of NBC reporter Brian Williams, who exaggerated his role in Iraq, points to a highly trusted and respected news figure breaching a journalistic ethical code. His example is not unique.

Social media sites rely on their users, including citizen journalists, to uphold a code of content. In its “Statement of Rights and Responsibilities”, Facebook asks users to refrain from posting any work that infringes on other people’s copyright, or is threatening, intimidating, or could be perceived as hate speech or pornographic. “You will not use Facebook to do anything unlawful, misleading, malicious or discriminatory.” However, as Stephen M. Mutula of the African Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics notes, Facebook does not regulate or have any way of ensuring that users have authentic identities or the veracity of information (Mutula, Stephen, *African Centre of Excellence*, 2013).

The “Healthy Media Vibrant Societies Africa” published by Tara Susman-Peña from Media Map Project notes that media literacy skills correspond with literacy skills (Susman-Peña, 2012). High media literacy skills, or the ability to critically assess the veracity and quality of content, are important for sifting through the plethora of media and news. Mutula argues that the cultural, political, linguistic and economic differences across the continent make Africans more vulnerable to ethical breaches with social media (Mutula, Stephen, *African Centre of Excellence*, 2013). This, perhaps, makes the question of regulating social media content even more crucial (Mutula, Stephen, *African Centre of Excellence*, 2013). However, what is the line between regulating social media and press restriction?

Harnessing the power of social media v regulation

According to McKinsey’s *Global Insights*, social media allows social interactions to occur with the speed, scale and “disruptive economics” of the Internet, and is thus an unprecedented way of organising “knowledge, culture, and economic and political power”. By allowing co-creation and multiple sources of distribution, the nature of social media blocks gate-keeping practices and allows millions of users to participate in shaping the economic and political discourse which they want. The value of co-creation and multiple sources of information can also be perceived in the gains in transparency that are made when socio-political trends are mapped out and data collected in real time. The clearest example could be the UN’s use of the “My World” survey and associated social media tools and campaigns to collate information on the post-2015 UN Development Agenda – the set of global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that will replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) when they expire this year. In addition, the SocialGood Summit, powered by Mashable and the UN Foundation, is becoming a regular feature at the UN in New York in September. Social media thus presents itself as a crucially relevant tool for discourse and dialogue, particularly in the face of multiple governance gaps that haunt the African continent.

In addition to its potential in influencing discourse, utilising social media can provide very real economic gains by allowing greater access to information, trends and insights. Start-up cultures, which were heavily emphasised as an employment option for youth during the economic downturn, have relied extensively on the “sharing” economy, on the digital “word-to-mouth” recommendations and on the disruptive-collaborative nature of social media. The same dynamic has also been employed to advance causes, such as championing climate action, gender equality and poverty reduction. One example is the highly commended platform Ushahidi, which helped map political violence during the Kenyan elections. Such context-specific social media platforms allow for sharing of life-saving information.

On top of it, the world is already toying with various structures that are suited to a context where social interactions in a digital space are a reality: as demonstrated, for instance, by the use of bitcoins as an actual currency. In the African continent, there is as yet an untapped space for such interactions to occur and such prosperity to be acquired. Thus attention must be given to how value creation can occur through social media by allowing creative youth to develop tailored solutions; by shortening the amount of time that it takes to transfer information; by linking customers to products more directly; by calling out human rights abuses and gaps in governance.

Conversely, concerns over poor information, radicalisation (bearing in mind that terrorist organisations such as IS have effectively used social media to recruit young people), cyber-bullying, defamation and other misuse of social media are very valid. In the World Economic Forum’s Global Risks Report 2015, cyber threats and misuse of technology (with social media and connectivity being one of its components) were listed as systemic threats. This report also argues that how emerging technologies will evolve is highly uncertain, and this poses a dilemma to policymakers, particularly relating to the spatial dimensions of where to regulate the internet, if at all. An example is which jurisdiction - national or international? National restrictions may lead to inconsistency across the world in terms of regulatory measures and thus hinder progress in some while allowing other countries to move ahead. Furthermore, regulating an emerging technology or process too early may curtail future creative developments and thus curb any gains to be made. And, technologies are increasingly interdisciplinary: for example, technologies relating to energy efficiency would rely on technology-based information to ensure that it becomes an integrated part of the sharing economy (for example, a Smart Grid connecting various independent power producers would require some level of social interaction).

Additionally, we face the challenge of ensuring the basic infrastructure is available to all millennials. Even as Africa is regularly touted as the continent that is mastering mobile technology, with more than 400 million Africans using mobile phones, there is still a disparity between how connected Africa is compared with the rest of the world. As of now, African social media voices are dominated by spheres of usage concentrated in countries such as South Africa and Nigeria, which in themselves face the issue that most

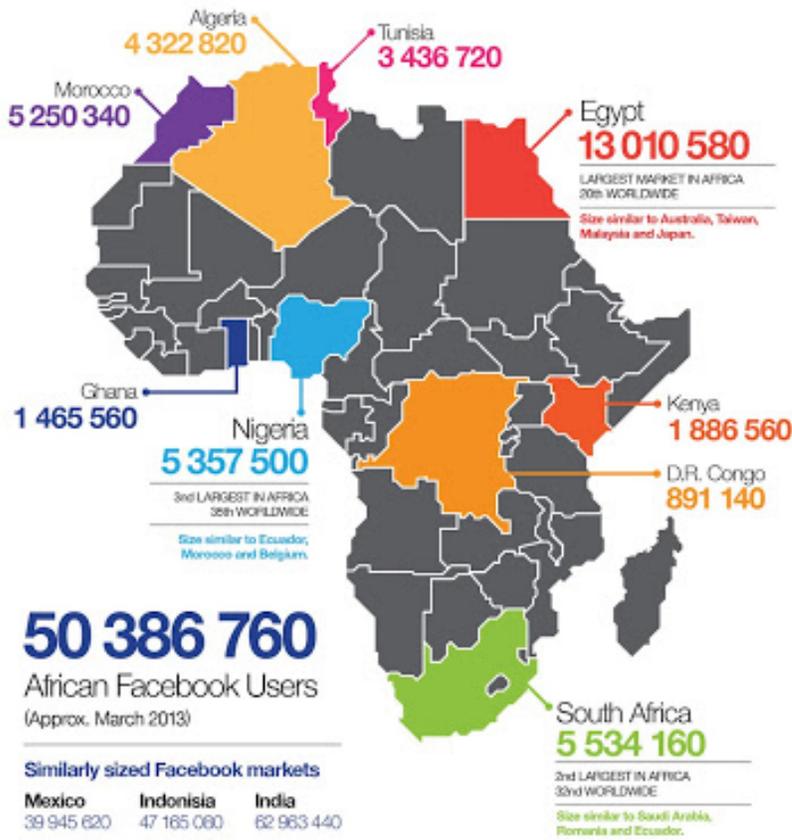
users are urban or peri-urban. To ensure a full process of democratisation, infrastructural elements such as the high cost of broadband access or electricity or up-to-date hardware must be addressed.

As mentioned, the African continent has a long way to go before it reaches the level of social media connectivity seen in other parts of the world. Given that youth are the dominant demographic in Africa, this represents a vast potential to be tapped.

African Facebook Users in 2013



An overview of the latest user numbers in the largest Facebook markets across Africa.



50 386 760

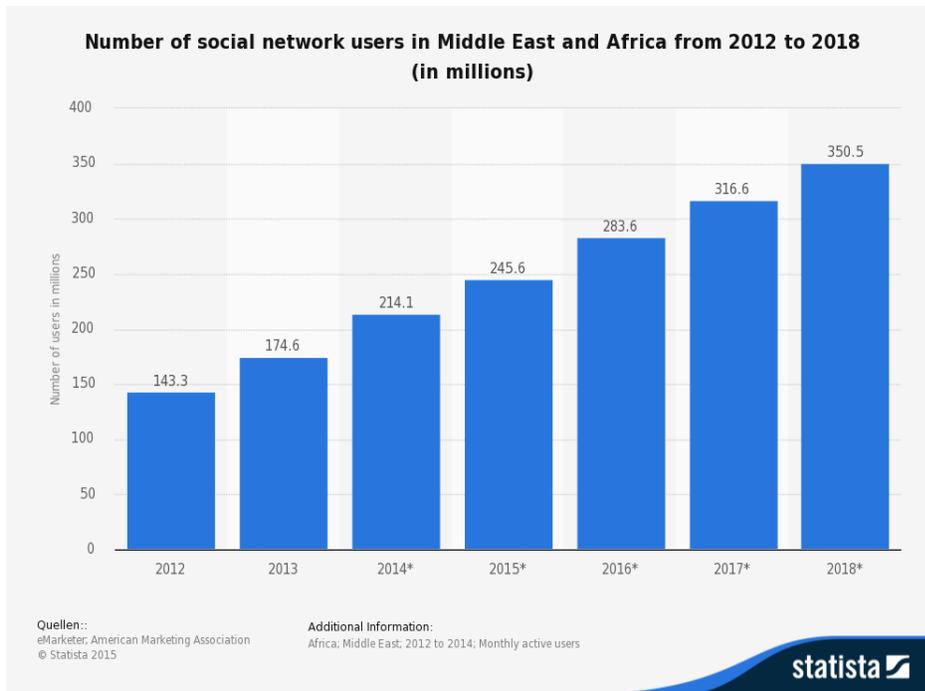
African Facebook Users
(Approx. March 2013)

Source
<http://www.socialbakers.com>

afrographique.tumblr.com
Infographic designed by @ivanisawesome

Recommendations from Johns Hopkins, African Center for Excellence and Media Map Project:

- Johns Hopkins recommends individuals should try to identify credible information on social media by examining the age of the social media account, and its reputation and network. <http://guides.library.jhu.edu/c.php?g=202581&p=1335031>
- The Institute for Public Policy Research argues that there should be some universal regulatory body, removed from government interests, that oversees and regulates Internet communication. This regulatory body should ensure free, unfiltered access to content for all, but regulate content that is inherently destructive.
- Media Map Project suggests that donors should try to support the development of a vibrant, free and independent media that produces quality content and foster professionalism in the media sector, specifically for smaller organisations. They note that most Africans lack the fundamental media literacy skills that would allow them to easily sort discern quality and accurate information.
- David Allen Green from the *New Statesman* suggests: "Once social media is understood as an advanced form of active citizenship then it can become part of the solution to the problem of abuses of political and media power; not part of the problem to be addressed by regulation." Regulation also means simply that things are done better than they otherwise would be: for example, when one "regulates one's own conduct". Bloggers and others in social media are willing and able to call out media excesses and bad journalism. The reaction is immediate and can be brutally frank. They are sometimes wrong, as are formal regulators. But they can take time and allow the media to produce better, more well-informed stories."
- Stephen M. Mutula of African Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics argues that sensitivity to socio-cultural, political and economic differences should remain a priority for scholars debating ethical and moral issues around social media. They should also debate with stakeholders and develop interventions on ethical and compliance issues (*Information Ethics in Africa: Cross-cutting Themes*)
- Stephen Ward of the University of Madison Wisconsin suggests a national coalition that would unite journalists and non-journalists and create a code to support standards across all forms of journalism. He also suggests convening workshops and conferences to support the educational mission of the commission (*Ward, Stephen, "Beyond Self-Regulation: Creating a National Coalition", University of Wisconsin Center for Journalism Ethics, 2015*)



To discuss: can we introduce regulations?

1. We cannot police the internet: the best that can be done is to ensure that people are aware of the implications of their contributions. A proposition to achieve this aim is a standardised social media global committee that would:

- create rules and regulations that social media users must abide by.
- create legislation to punish people who do not abide by those rules.

2. Are rights of lesser importance than teaching/educating people how to assess information they encounter? How can we educate users so they are aware of the implications associated with any contribution made online?

3. One school of thought, following the line of social media experts such as Richard Stacy, is that social media is best used for connecting rather than distributing information. How can we educate users to tell the difference between useful content and unnecessary content?

4. To ensure that the African continent does not get left behind when it comes to tapping into the space and value offered by digital media, it is important to focus on digital literacy rather than regulation, as well as building skills and infrastructure for productive connectivity. As per the Network Readiness Index (NRI), African countries are performing less well, with repercussions on the quality of the dialogue,

business, and e-government³. In countries such as the US, "Freedom of the Internet" is a policy ideal: should we should aspire to this as well, with the aim of consolidating civil society, citizen power and social entrepreneurship through the protection of a global public sphere which allows for constructive dialogue?

5. Instead of barring access to certain types of media, governments should be competing to create an influential discourse in this public sphere and take part in this dialogue – as equals. By doing so, governments demonstrate that they are not scared of dissenting voices, but have the maturity to take on board constructive criticism and scrutiny.

6. Complex issues such as natural resource use, climate change, conflict, and entrepreneurial models, can be translated into information that can be shared on social media in "bite size", to enable a broader understanding from the population of key developmental issues, thus allowing them to engage critically with thorny issues. In this respect, the literacy and awareness is expected not only about social media usage, but about developmental issues as well to allow a rich dialogue to occur. The focus is on building the ecosystem around the use of social media rather than regulating social media itself.

Increasing digital literacy

In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to acknowledge the wide inter-country disparities in accessing media (whether social media or otherwise). On one hand you have a wide rural-urban divide where a greater majority of young men and women in rural areas can barely use a computer. This is further compounded by the high cost associated with accessing the media; be it the cost of the gadgets such as computers or smartphones and the maintenance thereof, or transport to the nearest internet cafe. Besides, most rural places have no access to electricity making it difficult for private internet service providers to penetrate such areas.

On the other hand, you find a gender divide in computer literacy and accessing internet; for social-cultural and economic reasons women tend to have less access to media - whether internet cafes or through smartphones. They are more likely to have a lower income compared to men, they are less mobile than men and so on. Yet increased access to media by women can have very positive impacts on many social economic problems including fertility and population growth, child health among others.

³ <http://www.communicationsafrica.com/internet/africa-lagging-behind-in-network-readiness-says-wef-report>

In the News

Use of SoundCloud helps Burundi journalists circumvent government censorship of independent radio from Quartz.com. <http://qz.com/436195>

Targeting Africa's 200 million Internet users, Facebook opens first sales office in the continent from CNBC <http://cnb.cx/1IGDfV7>

Facebook Africa is building mobile ad market <http://qz.com/441161>

Continent's youth highlights the Africa that is not covered by media <http://gu.com/p/4a95e/stw>

Africa through the eyes of its top Instagrammer: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/18/the-light-of-africa-through-its-top-instagrammer.html?via=desktop&source=twitter>

Is Facebook trying to knock out blogging platforms? <http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/is-facebook-trying-to-knock-out-blogging-platforms-medium-wordpress-with-notes/625438>

Additional material:

Train My Generation survey (2014)

http://www.ny-forum-africa.com/lang/content_en/downloads/NYFA_CitizensSummit.pdf

Risks and Responsibility in a Hyperconnected World report

http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_IT_PathwaysToGlobalCyberResilience_Report_2012.pdf

Citizen power – Leading Connected Societies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaEaM2RLDFw>

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