

“We need to bring the human back into the digital conversation”

Interview with Nanjala Nyabola

What are the benefits of social media for Kenyan society?

In Kenyan society, we have seen a lot of interesting interactions between what is happening on social media and what social media has made possible, especially with regard to how people are defining

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communities and how people are defining belonging and being part of this Kenyan nation. You have to keep in mind that Kenya has a history of authoritarianism. We lived under a one-party regime for almost 40 years and there was a lot of control of what people could say, where people could say it or when people could gather. There was not really freedom of association, there was not really freedom of expression, and there was not really freedom of speech. The digital sphere has allowed people to push these boundaries, to form new groups based on common political interest or common social interest that would otherwise have been banned under the one-party regime. It has allowed us to accelerate the achievement of some of these freedoms. We are seeing people uniting across ethnic groups, across gender lines, across age lines to come together to help people find work. We are seeing people coming together to raise money for victims of domestic violence in very remote parts of the country that would otherwise not be heard of in the major cities. We also see people from different backgrounds jointly raising money for those suffering severe illnesses, and that is something we would not have seen previously. Before, people would rather raise money for specific social, political or personal projects

based on family (and extended family) connections or based on ethnic and religious groups. Instead, we can now see people uniting across those lines and reaching out to people they wouldn't ordinarily have reached out to. It has enabled people to tell a new story about Kenyan identity and Kenyan belonging, which have become very powerful political forces.

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What are the negative impacts of social media?

The negative effects have been severe in some cases. One element that we have seen, for example, is the propagation of hate speech. Now this is really important because Kenyan elections can be very competitive and they can usually be contested along ethnic lines. And it is a very easy point of mobilisation for a politician who has enough money to spend on this, whether you are talking about instigating physical violence by paying people to go and attack people in another part of the city or whether you are talking about people paying trolls and creating bots online in order to spread specific hate messages. We saw a great upswing in online hate speech during the 2017 election. We have also seen a lot of threats against women who are visible and vocal online. There has been a lot of misinformation and rumours being spread online, trying to manipulate public opinion about certain people.

Another concern for me is what I call digital colonialism. International or foreign corporations come into Kenya or other African countries and use social media as an entry point to enter the political conversation and to manipulate public opinion in favour of a specific candidate or a specific party. In addi-

tion, the government of Kenya has been spending an absurd amount of money on British corporations that are able to manipulate public opinion based on collected data and analysis of the region. During the last election, both the main ruling party and the main opposition party spent a significant amount of money on these things and we are wondering whether this money should rather be spent domestically, for example on social welfare projects. It is also questionable why a British corporation can come and interfere in a Kenyan election for profit, especially since those profits are extradited to the United Kingdom and do not necessarily support the Kenyan political space. These are some of the challenges that social media has presented with regard to the political process in Kenya.

How can analogue politics become fit for digital democracy?

I think that is a great question. The most important thing we can do right now as a global community is to spend more time bringing the human back into the digital conversation. And whether it is psychology or sociology or history or policy, we need to bring the humanities lens back into how we view and understand human behaviour. Because I think for too long we have assumed that technology was a neutral thing

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and that if we just threw enough technology at some of these complex human problems, they would be solved faster or more efficiently. Kenya is showcasing that it is simply not true. There have been some fantastic developments but there are also a lot of things that are causing concerns. The intersection between the digital and the analogue is raising a lot of challenges that require much more, a sophisticated approach rather than simply just throwing technology at the

problem. We cannot keep abandoning this space to “techies”. We cannot keep abandoning this space and leave it to technical regulation and technical tweaking. What we really need to understand is that some of these platforms are changing how we relate to our communities, how we relate to our families, how we

relate to our nation state. These are fundamental questions for humanity, and we need more of that conversation to address what is happening in those spaces.

What will be the future challenges with regard to social media platforms?

One thing I pay very close attention to is the development of social media platforms and the different phases we are going through. It is worth remembering that at this particular point we are on the third iteration of social networking platforms. At first, we had the generation of platforms like Friendster, which is now defunct, followed by the second generation like hi5 and myspace. Many of these revolutionary platforms were sold for an incredible amount of money. They were supposed to be the pinnacle of development, only to go out of fashion and become completely obsolete less than 10 years later. The only second-generation social media platform that still exists is linkedin. In my opinion, it had a much more low-key approach to growth and expansion, not trying to take over the world overnight. There is no guarantee that Facebook and Twitter, which are already 14 or 15 years old, will still exist five years from now. Something new might come along and there is a good chance that it will replace whatever is popular right now. So from a human and a political perspective, as well as from a regulatory perspective, I ask myself: Are we regulating for the platforms that we have now or are we working towards creating a climate which will enable any new network coming up to respond to the challenges we face in a more human way? Are we able to create a climate where social networks can flourish, a climate that will enable us to have peaceful, inclusive societies instead of only focusing on the issues embedded on the platforms that exist today?

Nanjala Nyabola

Nanjala Nyabola is a writer and political analyst based in Nairobi, Kenya. Her research and writing primarily focuses on conflict and post-conflict societies, particularly on refugees, migration and politics.

Nanjala is the author of “Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics” (2018) and the co-editor of “Where Women Are: Gender and the 2017 Kenyan Election” (2018).



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Phone +49 (0)228 959 25-0 | Fax -99
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Hillary Crowe

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