

Social Media report_Ke_-1-31 July 2015

In this first submission, I begin by highlighting notable 'events' on social media this month. I deem them notable because they stimulated a flurry of commentary and/or because they seem newsworthy from a security perspective. I end with some thoughts on navigating Kenya's social media sphere.

The largest security operation to occur in a while is related to a crackdown on illicit alcohol that was ordered by the President, Uhuru Kenyatta, due to what initially appeared to be anecdotal evidence until I performed a Google search and discovered academic works on "rampant alcoholism" in Kenya. On July 1st, the President, called for illegal brews to be destroyed and alcoholics detained for rehabilitation. This sparked a debate on social media on the correct way to handle the problem. Some of the more suspicious (or savvy?) commenters on social media noted that the crackdown had begun in the President's home county. They associated this with a plot to reverse the declining birth rate in order to maintain electoral dominance in future decades.

However, the top social media story of the last month, by virtue of the intensity in number of tweets and facebook commentary, are the riots in Kibera that began on June 23rd. In what were essentially anti-government protests, groups of youth wearing t-shirts indicating their allegiance to Lang'ata (and therefore Kibera) Member of Parliament, Raila Odinga, torched development projects that had been implemented by the National Youth Service (NYS), a government program. I happened to be with an American who received a text message alert from the US Embassy in Kenya warning of demonstrations in the Lang'ata/Kibera area. @Ma3route a mobile phone app and twitter account that alerts users to issues that may affect their commute was warning of the same. Often opinion on events such as these are divided along party and ethnic lines; however, in this case, the majority of the social media commentariat were united in disparaging the demonstrations as acts of misguided vandalism on projects paid for by their taxes. Based on the dialogue on twitter, those supporting the arson felt that the government projects were tantamount to bribery of the electorate, an insult to their intelligence and a breach into Mr. Odinga's territory. Yet another narrative emerging on social media was that the protestors were demonstrating over government corruption. A few days prior, Cabinet Secretary in the Ministry of Planning Devolution, Anne Waiguru, had held a press conference informing the public of an attempt to defraud the Ministry of Ksh. 820 million that had been slated for NYS projects. Apparently, some as yet unknown individual had stolen a computer password to a financial procurement system and illegally approved tenders for the stated amount. The story was that the demonstrations were an expression of disapproval over the embezzlement of funds that were to be used to pay workers. The CS later clarified that what she had been reporting at the press conference was an attempted (not actual) theft, which had been thwarted the nature of the technology, which allowed such fraud to be detectable.

This NYS saga continues to unfold in different permutations which feature on social media. The opposition continues to call for Anne Waiguru's suspension, given that other cabinet secretaries linked to corruptions scandals have been asked to step aside pending investigation. Pro-Waiguru supporters label this as a 'witch-hunt' as Waiguru is seen to be popular with the Office of the President. All this plays out on social media. A pro-government MP, speaking up for Waiguru, was later arraigned in court for addressing a rally and suggesting that opponents of NYS should be slashed with *pangas*. This has intensified allegations by a certain segment of social media activists, that the NYS, program which recruits youth and gives them vocational training all the while emphasising patriotism and discipline, is in fact the genesis of a pro-government militia. Alarming sentiments such as these are not policed on

twitter. However, the mass media also seems to tend towards the sensational and social media can be the place to go for verification and rebuttal.

It is not always obvious which mass media stories will catch on social media. Wanjeri Nderu (@WanjeriNderu) posted photographs which made the rounds on July 3, 2015 after she was allegedly attacked by goons for shining a spotlight on various corruption scandals. She claimed that it had been impressed upon her she should refrain from her social media activism. Her story inspired the hashtag '#SoldierOn' which was echoed by a wider community that the activist element but it was not a story that made it into the news cycle.

Conversely, on Sunday 12th July, *The Daily Nation* newspaper published a story on a *Wikileaks* revelation that the NIS—National Intelligence Service—had acquired a surveillance system from an Italian company. In order to prove its capabilities, *Hacking Team*, were allegedly instructed to take down the blog of contentious political commentator, Robert Alai (@RobertAlai). Discussion on twitter around this topic was heavy amongst the 'activists', who expressed concerns about privacy. However, unlike the Kibera demonstrations, the topic did not appear to register much on the radar of the active and vociferous #KOT (Kenyans on twitter), who can be thought of general public. Some of the indifference may have been related to the fact that, *Wikileaks* is somewhat old news. However, the *Daily Nation* did present the communiqués between *Hacking Team* and the NIS as recent. I would attribute the KOT's indifference to a general impatience with a certain brand of activism that they think of constantly stirring the pot. Mr. Alai's *Kahawa Tungu* blog and twitter feed have a reputation for sensationalism, he therefore is not necessarily a sympathetic actor.

On July 13th, Moi University in Eldoret had to close due to political and ethnic tensions related to upcoming student elections. Eldoret is a town in the heart of the Rift Valley which is historically a Kalenjin area. However, beginning in the colonial era, it has grown into a large town with a significant population of other ethnic groups, particularly the Kikuyu. The tensions that forced the closure of the university led twitter users to discuss the underlying tensions that continue to exist after the 2007-2008 post-election violence. The tenor of the commentary by the KOT around this saga was noticeably more sombre than usual. It was mostly a series of tweets by users in Eldoret attesting to incidents where they had been referred to as 'foreigners' or made to feel unwelcome.

The death of two Al-Shabaab leaders through a US drone attack that occurred around the 13th of July led to expressions of jubilation, especially since many assumed that one of those killed was the mastermind of the Garissa University attack that occurred earlier this year; that was not the case. Many saw the mission as connected to the arrival of President Obama in Nairobi for the Global Entrepreneurship Summit slated for July 24th-25th. The general tenor of social media discussion around the visit has been anticipation peppered with apprehension about the traffic problems and constraints that may result from security measures during the visits. If social media is any indicator, it appears that most Nairobians are planning to stay indoors or head out of the city on that weekend.

In the days prior to the re-opening of Westgate Mall of July 18th, 2015, opinion was divided on the wisdom of re-establishing a large, shopping centre at the scene of such an upsetting attack. Doubts were raised about security, given that the revamped building is a replica of the old one. Even though screening is required to enter the mall, as it was prior to the raid on September 22, 2013, the mall is still not enclosed behind walls. Another popular message belonged to those who saw its reconstruction as is, as a symbol of defiance and courage.

Notes on Using Twitter to Obtain Information related to Security

In general, to know if a topic has received attention beyond a narrow group of twitter users, it will trend with #KOT. A search of #KOT will reveal what is the topic of interest on a particular day. For the most part, the KOT favour facetious and humorous topics. They often exhibit mob behaviour against a common antagonist.

Otherwise there is a particular echo chamber which often features news related to security, mostly government impropriety. Robert Alai, mentioned above is one such person. Others include:

Ory Okolloh Mwangi (@kenyapundit), a political blogger at *Mzalendo.com*. Her tweets are of the “speaking truth to power” variety. Due to her status as a founder of *Ushahidi* she has a lot of followers and is seen as a credible source. However, I would not necessarily describe her views as nuanced.

@Boniface Mwangi, also famous internationally for his activism and for creating PAWA254 (@Pawa254), an artist/activist collective, also has name recognition. However, his views are also affiliated with pro-western, progressive elite.

@KaaRada is a new mobile phone application and twitter account that provides its users of security and crime alerts. It was created after the Garissa University terrorist attack where 148 students died.

On the other end of the spectrum are institutional government sources:

@InteriorKE is the twitter account for the Ministry of the Interior and Coordination of National Government in the Office of the President. @JoeNkaissery is the Cabinet Secretary’s handle.

@JBoinnet belongs to the Inspector General of Police

@KDF to the Kenya Defence Forces

@USEmbassyKenya is followed by a large number of Nairobians, for they often post the same security text messages that they send staff and citizens on their twitter feed.

I belong to a couple of *Whatsapp* groups, which on occasion share alerts and security tips. Three days ago, a member of the group associated with my primary school—Consolata Class of ’94—let us know that we should be sure to carry our identification cards as there would be a “major security operation”; probably Obama and GES related. I expect these kind of helpful updates feature in other groups. Nevertheless, it can be alarming. A few months ago we received *Whatsapp* and text messages indicating that Al Shabaab were planning to shoot motorists stuck in one of Nairobi’s infamous traffic jams on 7/7. Apparently, these warning hoax messages make the rounds from time to time; they are the 2015 version of the chain letter.