

Chapter 2

Identity and the New Communication Technologies: Evidence from Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the use of short text messages on cell phones and e-mail conversations among social networks to negotiate identities in Kenya. It shows that these New Communication Technologies have revolutionised the way of doing things in Kenya, including politics. It comes out that Old Communication Technologies are being complemented by the new technologies which are now taking over and which can be used to negotiate both narrow ethnic-blocks and national identities. The chapter shows that the new technology is not always used to portray and perpetuate narrow ethnic identities; rather, instances exist when the users want to project professional and national identities. Supported with data that focus on the pre- and post-2007 elections, the chapter argues that inasmuch as the New Communication Technologies are good, great caution should be exercised when using them since unchecked use might bring untold suffering to society.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present chapter discusses the use of New Communication Technologies (NCTs) in negotiating and perpetuating various identities in Kenya. New

Communication Technologies include computers, mobile phones, facsimile and the Internet. The NCTs are distinguished from Old Communication Technologies (OCTs) that comprise radio, television and newspapers which are also referred to as the old media (Danmole 2010).

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The paper focuses on the Internet and mobile phones (cell phones) for communication. Jensen (2001, p.98) has described the Internet as a product of the ICTs while Crystal (2006, p.3) views the Internet as “an association of computer networks with common standards which enable messages to be sent from any registered computer (or *host*) on one network to any host or any other”. The Internet developed experimentally in the United States of America in the 1960s as a network which grew fast to include the military, federal, regional, university, business and personal users and is now the world’s largest network (*ibid*). The Internet provides many services and enables many people to be in touch through electronic mail (e-mail), chat groups, virtual worlds, World Wide Web, instant messaging, blogging, etc. It is notable that more than a quarter of the world’s population was using the Internet in 2009 whereby over a quarter of the world’s population or 1.9 billion people had access to a computer at home (ITU, 2009). On the other hand, according to ITU (2009), the cell phone is the most rapidly adopted technology in history. It is the most popular and widespread personal technology in the world with an estimated 4.6 billion mobile broadband subscribers globally as of 2009 having overtaken the fixed broadband subscribers in 2008.

As already indicated, the present chapter focuses on the role of the Internet and the cell phone in negotiating identities. The New Communication Technologies vide mobile telephony and Internet services are presently widely available in Kenya so that sending short text messages (SMS) and e-mails is fashionable. The prevalence of mobile phones is a product of the liberalization and privatization of the telecommunications sector since the late 1990s when competition in the mobile telephone market came into being (Chepkonga 2002). Subsequently, mobile broadband subscribers increased from 15,000 in 1999 to 17.4 million by mid 2009 (RoK, 2009) through the four authorised mobile operators, namely Safaricom, Zain, Econet Wireless, and Telkom. During the same period,

the number of cyber cafes also increased. Thus surfing the Internet to exchange e-mails and also to read and make comments on social networks appears to be widely in use among those who are computer literate. Internet has also gradually moved away from cyber cafes to mobile phones which have advanced facilities that allow one to surf the World Wide Web. Portable modems are also sold by mobile telecom companies and are ensuring that ‘last mile’ connectivity is achieved (Ratemo 2010).

As we discuss the role of NCTs, it should be noted that the NCTs are channels of communicating messages of different kinds including messages on individual or group identities using language which includes lexical choices. It is the lexical choices that the users make vide the NCTs that carry the message(s) which project(s) the identity(ies) of the sender(s)-receiver(s). Falling from this, the present chapter’s argument is that identities in Kenya, just like elsewhere in the world, are dynamic; that is, they are negotiated and the process of negotiation is reflected in the way that language is used. Therefore, one can identify various identities such as those reflecting peer-groups, professionals and members of different ethnicities and political parties especially in line with claims of Tajfel’s (1978) social identity theory. Closely related to Gumperz’s (1982) categorization of ‘we’ and ‘they’ codes, the social identity theory distinguishes between in-group and out-group members whereby members of either group positively evaluate themselves vis-à-vis the other. Furthermore, in the context of the present chapter, the groups can be private individual(s), i.e. members of particular ethnic groups or impersonal bodies such as political parties, professional groups, etc. Thus the language uses done through the NCTs can be analyzed to yield the various identities some of which we have already mentioned. This chapter particularly seeks to unravel whether or not messages sent through the NCTs reflect identity(ies) that are deeply-seated and ones that usually start from ethnic ideological hegemony.

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