

Social Media: revolutionizing public health and climate change

Kiru Pillay - Researcher at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, doing a PhD in Disruptive Technology - the focus of his PhD is on the impact of Web 2.0 technology on trans-national social advocacy. He has over 20 years experience in the Information Technology Industry. Email: pillayki@ukzn.ac.za

Fiona Musana - Greenpeace Africa Communications Director. She has over 15 years experience in development communications, media and international development, having worked with various international organizations in Tanzania, Uganda, Germany and Sri Lanka. Email: fiona.musana@greenpeace.org

Public Health and climate change in sub Saharan Africa are at a crossroads; one cannot progress without the other but we continue to be blinded by this fact at our peril. Today, there is no other solution other than tackling the growing urgency – of the public health climate change manifold crisis – by looking at more innovative solutions to enhance social discourse. Recent events in North Africa show that everyone can and should take part in changing their future today. “Silo” planning and implementation culture has reached its peak for health and climate change “experts” alike and there is no other course but marching forward together. While many may look at Facebook, Twitter and all the other Web 2.0 social media with growing disdain, lessons from the recent Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions are a stark reminder that technology is here to stay and is a growing medium for many concerned citizens who feel enraged and empowered enough to take action against poor leadership.

Indeed, nearly half of the population across the globe are poor, faced with food insecurity, dwindling livelihoods, poor health and the impacts of decade long unsustainable resource exploitation, growing water scarcity, pollution and overfishing, just to name a few. The scale of the loss of species over the decades is scary to say the least, all made worse by the devastating impacts of climate change. In South Africa alone, poverty among youths is prevalent due to the extremely high number of unemployed youths, and this presents a major challenge.

For many Africans, women, girls, boys, and the elderly alike, life has become even harder lately because of dependence on increasingly scarce natural resources. Now, burdened by poverty and poor health, these individuals cannot even make a living out of the land that they inherited from those before them. The pain of trying to reap from a land that saw so much harvest before is deep, especially because they are the ones who contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions. When asked, many will not give you a positive outlook. Is it all doom and gloom for these vulnerable people; the children who have been exposed to health risks caused by humans just like them? Does it mean that youth will continue to fight for a goal-less life? Decades-long solutions and innovative approaches outlined in this article, show that it is possible to reduce our carbon footprint while mobilising more individuals to say “I want a better today, and I want it now”.

Why climate change and why now?

In essence, decades-long research has shown that climate change is threatening to deter progress that has been made in sectors such as health and agriculture. How then do we bridge the gaps between environmental injustices, public health and the poverty that plague this vast continent?

How do players in the health and climate change spheres remain relevant and rooted to reality, while trying to advocate for change? This is where social media comes into play.

Enabling new spaces for social discourse

Over the years, not only has technology created new networks for simply distributing technology but it has also led to new patterns of interactions among citizens; individually and as organisations. This in turn has created new forms of social involvement and relationships. Indeed this facilitates social discourse unconstrained by geography, time and political interests (1).

As public health and climate change activists we form a critical part of civil society, which has been described as “the arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values” (2), with the aim of achieving public agendas and influence state policy. Technology and in particular social media has precipitated the emergence of new on-line civil society organisations (CSOs). The global organisation *Avaaz* (which means ‘voice’ in many Asian and Middle Eastern languages) is inherently web-based, and its mission is to “close the gap between the world we have, and the world most people everywhere want.” Some of the issues *Avaaz* campaigns for include environmental protection, human rights issues and poverty alleviation. A scan of their website reveals campaigns against the trade in elephant ivory through to the protection of gay rights in Uganda (<http://www.avaaz.org/en/>). The organisation attributes its existence and growth to technology and in particular the Internet which has allowed it to mobilise effectively for campaigns, and also allowed its supporters to easily connect to each other. *Avaaz* claims to have over 8.2 million members growing by 100,000 people per week, and to have conducted 15 million actions and approximately 3300 vigils in support of various campaigns. These figures make *Avaaz* the largest global online CSO. Additionally, *Avaaz* has been able to collect financial donations that run into millions of dollars for campaigns in support of democracy movements and humanitarian relief, all enabled by the Internet and social media. Nobel Prize winner Al Gore states on the website that “*Avaaz* is inspiring, and has already begun to make a difference.”

There is a collision of old realities and new technologies taking place precipitated by a number of elements: legitimacy of authority balanced against the ability of citizens to collaborate, the creation of networked communities with ‘shared awareness’ and the power of online activism. At stake in this collision are both the symbolic construction and the hard power of ‘The Public’. Increasingly traditional media (television and newspapers) combined with mobile phones, Internet sites, blogs, forums, chat rooms, video sharing, photo sharing, etc., comprise an emerging *networked public sphere*, in which the power of elites to control the public agenda and bracket the range of allowable opinions is seriously challenged.

The Internet as a strategy to drive public campaigns and political causes has increased substantially, mainly due to the pervasiveness of Web 2.0 social media. It is this pervasiveness that has changed the power dynamic between governments and citizens (3). Organisations have been conducting campaigns using online social networks with varying success to recruit members, promote issues and raise money. Social networking sites allow for public and private dissemination of information meaning you can send out confidential news to your members while at the same time sending a more carefully crafted message to the public.

Many environmental advocacy groups in particular, have pages on social networking sites and also employ other social media like blogs, vlogs, podcasts and wikis (4). This pervasiveness of social media has created a global network of interactive communication and a socially connected Web in which all users have the ability to contribute Web content:

- In 2007 the Humane Society of America used the MySpace site to advocate against the annual Canadian seal hunt. The site used a host of embedded media (maps, videos etc.) and by the end of the campaign had attracted 14,000 unique visitors; traffic to protectseals.org website increased by 50% and 500 new people signed up for the mailing list (5).
- The Student Global Aids Campaign (SGAC) created a wiki for the singular purpose of putting pressure on Abbott Laboratories to provide its Kaletra drug to people living with HIV/AIDS in Thailand. Abbott produces one of the most popular HIV management drugs, and the only one that works in hot climates, but the company drew the ire of worldwide health groups in 2007 when it refused to sell Kaletra in Thailand. The campaign started a wiki asking supporters to post photos, stories and information that would pressure Abbott to sell Kaletra in Thailand. The site had a timeline of Abbott's actions, info about HIV/AIDS medications, a review of the Thai law, demands for Abbott and a list of recommended actions for activists. Although this wasn't the only source of advocacy, it was a powerful tool and within five months the company agreed to sell the drug in Thailand (5).
- Social movements and civil society have discovered that maintaining blogs has numerous benefits including strengthening community ties and advancing key issues. Amnesty International, an international human rights campaigner active in over 150 countries, has historically relied on traditional media e.g. newsletters and e-mail, to interact with their approximate 2.2 million members (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/who-we-are>). While effective, the organisation in an attempt to create a bi-lateral channel of communication between staff and supporters started a blog. The Amnesty blog engages supporters and casual readers of the site through their comments and in so doing creates a dialogue between organisation and supporters (5). The Blog additionally posts news on events and ways for supporters to take action.
- In the early 1990s, Italian political activist Beppe Grillo, was banned from Italian public broadcasting television after making satirical comments against the ruling Italian Socialist Party (6). He then started a personal blog, blogging daily about current affairs, political events, environmental sustainability, political corruption and citizen activism. The blog has reached a remarkable level of readership and active discussion and was ranked among the top ten most influential and most visited blogs in the world. This example exemplifies the power of the blogosphere as a source of uncensored information and as a place for free discussion and sharing of ideas regardless of political partisanship.
- In December 2009 world leaders gathered in Copenhagen to discuss new goals to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions that fuel global warming. The organisation 'tcktcktck' (<http://tcktcktck.org>) was created to highlight the urgency of issues around climate change and claimed to have mobilised over 4790 bloggers on October 15th 2009, reaching over eleven million people in an effort to raise awareness around the issues to be discussed at Copenhagen.

- Text messaging has become a primary method of communication and offers immediacy unrivalled by any other technology. Using text messaging, organisations have been able to cost-effectively mobilise and recruit supporters. When Philippines activists wanted to topple the government of then-president Joseph Estrada, they used cell phones to mobilise thousands of people in a central point in Manila (7). They sent brief SMS's inviting friends to Manila's People Power shrine saying "wear red, bring banners, come now!" Protesters gathered at the shrine throughout the next day. Inspired by the enthusiasm of the crowd, new arrivals used text messages to invite yet more friends. When more than 700 000 people stood chanting at the shrine, Estrada resigned, turning power over to the crowd's choice for president, Gloria Arroyo. Estrada refers to his ousting as a 'coup de text' (5).

Where next for Africa?

Mobile telephony has changed dramatically to the point where mobile phones have become woven into the fabric of society. Columbia University's Earth Institute has described the mobile phone as "the single most transformative tool for development" (8). Mobile telephony is important both as a tool in its own right, but also because it offers opportunities for the deployment of Web 2.0 social media on a mobile platform. According to the European Network and Information Security Agency (9) approximately 65 million people access Facebook via their mobile phones and these users are almost 50% more active than traditional non-mobile users. Furthermore many Africans are coupling their already extensive use of cell phones with a more recent and massive interest in social media leading what may be the next global trend: a major shift to mobile Internet use, with social media as its main drivers.

Studies suggest that when Africans go online with their mobile phones, they spend much of their time on social media platforms, while the sending and reading e-mails, reading news and posting research queries becoming less important activities (10). In recent months Facebook has become the most visited website in most of Africa, and its massive growth on the continent has resulted in the number of African Facebook users standing at over 17 million, up from 10 million in 2009 (10). Furthermore, two other social networking websites, Twitter and YouTube, rank among the most visited websites in most African countries.

Facebook use is not confined to the regular citizens; indeed famous African stars, thinkers, political leaders and companies have rapidly joined the global conversation - the Facebook fan base of Côte d'Ivoire's football star and UN goodwill ambassador Didier Drogba is more than 1 million people, while Zambian best-selling author and economist Dambisa Moyo has more than 26,000 followers on Twitter (10). Media organizations in South Africa and companies such as Kenya Airways are using various social media platforms to interact better with customers and readers. During recent elections in Côte d'Ivoire candidates did not only tour cities and villages, they also moved the contest online, regularly posting campaign updates on Twitter and Facebook (10).

Africa has also been a hotbed of innovation when it comes to social media: Ushahidi (meaning 'testimony' in Swahili) is a Kenyan organisation that was started after violence erupted post the country's general election in 2008 (www.usahidi.com). It developed an open-source platform to

map reports of violence based on reports submitted by Kenyans, either via the Web or through mobile phones.

What does this mean for us?

It is time to wake up - our era of workshops, conferences, dialogues and any other event imaginable may soon come to an end! Today many people know they have the power to make a difference and many across the continent will do what it takes to “toi toi” whether as armchair or frontline activists. As civil society activists, we cannot avoid but mobilise the masses, use the common voice and work together, creating a corps of local activists and volunteers who understand the nuances of the societies in which we operate and are able and willing to go out into the field or stalk the corridors of power to lobby, cajole and be the change the continent needs. Together we can work to turn technological innovations into opportunities; using the unprecedented social media platforms to address key injustices facing sub Saharan Africa: poverty, poor health and disastrous impacts of climate change.

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