Chapter 14

Ethnic Stereotyping on Kenyan Blog Sites in the 2013 Political Elections: A Spurious Harbinger of Ethnic Discord

Nabea Wendo
Laikipia University, Kenya

ABSTRACT

This paper presents results of an investigation into ethnic stereotyping on blog sites in Kenya’s 2013 political elections. The study, which was hinged on the taxonomy of stereotypes model, sourced data from two ethnically based blog sites, thus Kenyalist.com and Nipate.com. From over 80 posts on the blog sites, purposive sampling was used to identify eight posts which were deemed appropriate in view of the objectives of the study and the theoretical grounding. Results showed that ethnic stereotyping revolved around thematic areas such as marriage and ethnicity, culture and ethnicity, communal aggrandizement and ethnic divide and arbitration. It also emerged that language was a potent tool for stereotyping. The paper has however shown that the ethnic stereotypes that issued on blog sites during Kenya’s 2013 electioneering were unfortunate, because though largely spurious, they had the potential of influencing people as they went to the ballot box.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic stereotyping is a phenomenon that has been used in Kenya over the years, especially for humour purposes. It is common in schools and universities drama productions, among friends and peers, and in the mainstream radio and television stations. Matsumoto (2002) argues that stereotyping is universal and is used for different purposes. While stereotyping has been inherent in the mass media as spelt out by van Dijk (1986) and Adare (2005), a similar trend appears to take place in the social media today. The social media comes in various forms such as websites, emails, blogs, Facebook, WhatsApp, 2go, MySpace, twitter and so forth. These media are developing fast and becoming complex due to their abil-

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Sociability to incorporate all the other aspects of the mainstream media. Just like the conventional media, the social media have the potential to influence people’s perceptions and thinking due to their communicative power. This is because the internet is rapidly becoming a serious communicative channel, besides the fact that its material can easily flow to other media channels (Nabea, 2009).

Semin (2008) and Carnaghi and Yzerbyt (2008) argue that stereotypes do not take place in a vacuum, but are informed by context. However, while stereotypes can be used for constructive purposes (Lewis 2003, Nevo 2003), they can cause damage when not used tactfully (Adare, 2005; Schauer, 2003; Byrd & Clayton, 2003). For example, when stereotyping is not used responsibly, it can degenerate into negative ethnicity or worse still, hate speech, especially when communities are lampooned. Negative ethnic typecasting has lately become rampant on the Kenyan social media, and tends to incline to people’s political affiliation, especially during the electioneering. This is a worrying trend considering that hate speech has been blamed for partly playing a role in the 2007/2008 Post Election violence in Kenya (Kriegler Report 2008; Waki Report 2008). Yet, the dissemination of negative ethnicity narratives on the social media present a challenge in view of the fact that it is difficult to arrest and prosecute hatemongers as a result of the nomenclature of the media in question. For example, registration on social media is inchoate, while the country’s legislation fails to be in tandem with the fast dynamics of the field. This paper therefore set out to investigate ethnic stereotyping on the Kenyan blog sites during political elections with a view to finding out to what strategies bloggers use to perpetrate ethnic divide.

THEORETICAL PREMISE

The paper investigated two blog sites which pitted the Kikuyu and the Luo, the two major communities in Kenya who have mainly found themselves in different political camps since independence. Data was sourced from two ethnically based blog sites thus, Kenyalist.com and Nipate.com, which were active and robust on the countdown to the 2013 elections. The Luo and the Kikuyu have mainly produced presidential candidates in political elections. Going by the posts on the blog sites in question, the Luo blame the Kikuyu for betrayal considering that they have in the past supported Kikuyu presidential candidates, yet the Kikuyu have never returned the favour. It is argued that the Luo supported a Kikuyu candidate in the name of Jomo Kenyatta before independence, who eventually became Kenya’s first President. It is also held that in 2003, the Luo supported Mwai Kibaki a Kikuyu, who eventually brought to an end the long reign of the Kenya African National Union (KANU) in Kenya. Yet in both occasions, the Kikuyu presidents fell out with their Luo supporters once in office, which the later deem as betrayal. Conversely, the blog sites show that the Kikuyu consider the Luo as people who are bent on nagging their presidential candidates in view of the fact that they always form strong opposition to most governments. The Kikuyu also complain that the Luo have penchant for violence, especially the culture of stone-throwing, whether in football matches or political rallies. Of course the foregoing accusations and counteraccusations could be borne of typecasting since no research has been availed regarding the charges.

Yet, in 2013 when Kenya held its political elections, the strongest candidates for the presidency came from the Kikuyu and Luo communities. Uhuru Kenyatta was the candidate for Jubilee while Raila Odinga was the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD) candidate. The 2013 presidential elections were somewhat reflective of the 2007 elections which still pitted Raila Odinga as the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) candidate while there was Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu on Party of National