Chapter 14

Twitter and Africa’s ‘War on Terror’: News Framing and Convergence in Kenya’s Operation Linda Nchi.¹

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ABSTRACT

Before the close of 2011, Kenya launched its own local version of a ‘war on terror’ following persistent border incursions by the al-Qaida affiliated al-Shabaab militant group. In a conflict that was seen by many to be fought largely through modern military hardware, the emergence and effective use of social media as yet another site of this warfare reflected the growing influence of new media in mobilizing, debating and circulating issues of public interest. Specifically, this chapter reveals the particular frames that were used in Twitter to keep members of the public informed on the front line developments of the Operation Linda Nchi. Secondly, the study also investigates how the entrance of al-Shabaab into Twitter shaped the media framing of a war previously dominated by the more ‘legitimate’ Kenya Defence Force Twitter account. Finally, in a situation where the Twitter discourse was perceived and defined by the KDF as the official account of the war, this paper shows how the new and the old media converged in news reports in Kenya’s main newspapers and the resultant frames from this convergence.

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INTRODUCTION

*KDF is not keen on Twitter war nor propaganda. The rains have stopped pounding. Watch out for KDF.*

The mass movements commonly known as the ‘Arab Spring’ that began in North Africa and swept through the Arab world brought to the fore the crucial role of the social media in mobilizing and shaping discourse. The protests that began in Tunisia have so far seen the overthrow of dictators, extensive reforms in government, and also continued civil unrest in several other countries. And while debate still rages on the extent to which the social media was at the centre of these protests, it was not for nothing that some of these uprisings acquired the label ‘Facebook revolution’ or ‘Twitter revolution’, a testimony to the coordinating influence social media has on issues of significance in the world today.

Following persistent border incursions and several abductions of tourists by suspected Al Shabaab militants from Somalia, Kenya decided to launch perhaps one of its most ambitious military operations in its 50 year history. In mid October of 2011, the Kenyan Defence forces (KDF) moved heavy military equipment and massive divisions into the Somali boarder. On the 16th of October the first troops had crossed into Somalia and the now months old offensive dubbed *operation linda nchi* (operation protect the country) began. As expected, the public was eager to follow the proceedings at the frontlines and several journalists were embedded with the soldiers and would regularly file news reports to Nairobi. In addition, the military leadership set up a weekly news briefing in which the military spokesman gave a report on the proceedings of the war.

For a while, partly due to a recurring public discourse on patriotism and coupled with predictable sources of news for the local media, the hegemonic version of events from the military was published uncritically as the only report of the war. This was equally reflected in opinion columns and other commentaries, with only the most cautious and sublime critique on the war. The threat to this hegemonic voice first came through tweets from humanitarian organizations working inside war torn Somalia. The instantaneity and convenience of Twitter on reporting the war became equally apparent to the KDF. In late October, the military spokesman Emmanuel Chirchir complemented the weekly briefings with almost daily tweets from the frontlines. At the time of compiling this research he had made over 680 tweets, attached several pictures and videos through *Twitpic* and other links, all of which on several occasions converged to produce the major headlines or news accounts in the press and the broadcast media.

With more action increasing and the security situation on the ground becoming increasingly difficult for most humanitarian organizations to operate, the KDF held sway on Twitter in fortifying their hegemonic voice insofar as media accounts of the war proceeded. However, in early December of 2011, the al-Shabaab militants also created their own Twitter account and began tweeting under the handle HSM Press Office - an acronym for *Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen*, or Movement of Holy Warrior Youth. From the onset, it was clear that al-Shabaab had set sights on a wider audience by using the English language. From then on the war included not just physical combat but also a virtual war that revealed the increasing role that the new social media is playing not only as an embedded practice of daily life, but as a pivotal tool in framing news.

This is not the first time that militant and jihadi groups are taking advantage of popular social media to advance their objectives. According to The Investigative Project on Terrorism (IPT), jihadi media organizations are creating Facebook pages to bypass restrictions on terrorist organizations, and to pass on videos, pictures, and documents to followers. The report goes on to argue that such platforms allow these...